

# THE CLASSIC ADVENTURER



## COLIN JORDAN

WE INVESTIGATE COLIN JORDAN'S FAMOUS FIVE AND BUMBLING DETECTIVE DUO FLUKEIT & BLUNDERS

## THE MYSTERY OF ARKHAM MANOR

THE SLEEPY VILLAGE OF ARKHAM IS HOME TO MIKE LEWIS'S THRILLING MURDER MYSTERY

## TWO PIECES OF EIGHT

THE BEST BUDGET ADVENTURES THAT POCKET MONEY CAN BUY

## GET LAMP

DIGITAL ARCHEOLOGIST JASON SCOTT'S GROUNDBREAKING DOCUMENTARY

## DAVE HAWKINS

THE AUTHOR OF WIZARD'S WARRIOR AND STRANDED ON HIS CAREER & NEW ADVENTURE

## UNHALLOWED

SPOOKY GOINGS-ON INSIDE BLEKOTRON'S SUPERB HALLOWEEN MINI-ADVENTURE

# THE CLASSIC ADVENTURER

I owned an Acorn Electron as a kid. It wasn't the greatest games machine in the playground, but it did have the best game of all-time, Braben and Bell's *Elite*, and one of the best adventure games of all time, Trevor Hall's *Twin Kingdom Valley*.

For a boy with a fertile imagination, and an obsession with the Fighting Fantasy books, *Twin Kingdom Valley* whisked me through the screen, and into a fantasy world of babbling brooks, Forests, Orcs, Trolls, Goblins, Dragons, Kings and treasure!

I played as many adventures as I could, but It wasn't until I owned a ZX Spectrum and Fergus McNeill's *The Big Sleaze* that I encountered the same immersion with another game. A friend and I spent many weekends hunched over the keyboard, notepad and pen, determined that Sam Spillade would find the missing Maltese Bullfinch.

I'm therefore delighted that both Fergus and Trevor feature in this celebration of classic adventure games, along with many other adventures and authors that transported legions of other kids to far flung corners of their own imagination.

**Mark James Hardisty, 2019**



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# UNHALLOWED

Against the backdrop of crashing lightning, pouring rain and children in scary costumes, Blerkotronic Software released *Unhallowed*, a mini horror adventure written using Gilsoft's PAWS. The Classic Adventurer knocks on author Blerkotron's door, to find out if the game is a trick or delightful Halloween treat?

**Format:** ZX Spectrum 128K and Adventuron  
**Publisher:** Blerkotronic Software  
**Developer:** Blerkotron  
**Release Date:** Halloween 2018

Charles Cecil's series of adventures for Artic Software [see issue 04] dominate the formative years of Blerkotron, when the adventure influence and genre was perhaps at its zenith. He fondly recalls losing hours of time to the *Ship of Doom*, *Espionage Island*, *Planet of Death* and *Inca Curse*. Soon after, a friend loaned him *The Hobbit*, but since his knowledge of the book was limited, progress was slow. Later on, it was titles such as *Gremlins* and *Rigel's Revenge* that were loaded onto his ZX Spectrum, alongside two well known budget releases from British Telecom's software offshoot Firebird.

[Blerkotron] The first adventure I remember really loving was *Subsunk*- I stuck with that one for days until I finally managed to solve it. I liked its sequel, *Seabase Delta*, too, but it didn't strike me quite as much as the first game did. [...] Most of the ones I remember fondly were budget titles, which meant many of them were *Quilled*. A friend lent me a C90 with a load of hooky games on it and it included a copy of *The Quill* A06. I was fascinated but had no idea how to use it because it didn't have any instructions.

By accident I discovered that in those early versions you could load games produced with it back into the editor – I did this with a game called *A Spell of Christmas Ice* that was given away with a copy of 16/48 tape magazine. Once it was loaded up I took it apart and figured out how it worked and wrote my own basic instructions to help me get started. I managed to produce a couple of fairly rubbish games which my friends played and even tried to sell one to Atlantis Software. They sent me a very nice “no thank you” letter.

Eventually I bought a proper copy of *The Quill* so that I could get a more up-to-date version and a full manual, and I also picked up *The Graphic Adventure Creator*. I produced a handful of games, all of which were pretty awful, and then kind of gave up because no one wanted to play them – it was a lot of work when I had no prospective audience.

Thankfully, over time that attitude did change, though it was many, many years later. In 2016, as a challenge, Blerkotron decided to return to his interest in adventure writing and began to write a short game using *The Quill*, choosing Halloween as a theme.

[Blerkotron] As you might have guessed from my list of favourite adventures I don't really enjoy fantasy adventures. Dungeons and trolls and wizards have never really done it for me, I much preferred sci-fi or contemporary settings. Even now, there seem to be very few adventures with modern settings, so I thought it would be interesting to try something a bit less dungeons and dragons.

I'm a big Stephen King fan and had long thought about trying out something very narrative-heavy in his kind of 'supernatural things happening to regular folk' style. Adventures still weren't terribly

popular so I thought if I could produce something fairly quickly and release it at Halloween it'd gain more traction.

The game, originally called *All Hallows* targeted the basic ZX Spectrum. The ambition was understandably low-key, and the target seemed obtainable: A small, short story, or mini-game with a few locations and plenty of puzzles and narrative. Unfortunately, the original November deadline was missed and the project was shelved.

[Blerkotron] [...] The project spiralled in complexity and I just didn't have the time to do it justice; two months evaporated very rapidly and I realised I was two weeks out and only about 10% done. So, I resigned myself to the fact that I wasn't going to be ready and figured I'd aim for next Halloween instead, except then I made the mistake of taking a break. Days turned into weeks and [...] I got distracted with other things, like finally learning Z80 well enough to write a full game.

Fast-forward to 2018, and text adventures were making a bold comeback throughout the 8-bit scene. We witnessed the reemergence of Tim Gilberts, a reinvigorated John Wilson of Zenobi, the return of Magnetic Scrolls and a fresh interest in the Gilsoft *Adventure Systems* driven by Stefan Vogt [releasing his own game *Hibernated* in 2018 - see issue 02] and Chris Ainsley [using it to inspire the *Adventuron* system - see issue 05].

[Blerkotron] Stefan's enthusiasm for *Hibernated* made me sit up and take notice. [...] When it finally arrived I played it for ages, got stuck and decided to take it apart instead. I had a copy of *Unquill* kicking around and to my delight it decompiled the game just as easily as it did my Spectrum ones. *Quill* databases are fairly straight-forward and Stefan had done a great job of putting the game together neatly. [...] So after cheating [...] I completed the game and then started thinking about my own ditched project. [...] If there was any time to release an adventure game it was now, and I thought I could ride that wave [with] my ideas about refining and simplifying the experience.

Blerkotron has confronted many of the frustrations that most novice and early adventure players encountered - instant deaths, a lack of interactivity with a miniscule amount of items to examine and manipulate, and the frustration of fishing around trying to find the right verb and noun combination for puzzles in games with limited vocabularies.

[Blerkotron] My goal became to create something that both adventure fans and the adventure-phobic could enjoy. [...] It's no fun at all to be able to clearly see what the game wants you to do, but not be able to do it because you can't find the right combination of words. [...] LucasArts managed entire games with a handful of commands, so I decided to do exactly the same, right down to

#### ▶USE MEAL WITH MICROWAVE

You toss the tray into the microwave and start it up with an unhappy sigh. This wasn't the way you'd imagined the evening going.

After a few moments a somewhat unpleasant smell begins to fill the air and you find you've lost your appetite entirely.

As you're dropping the unopened meal into the bin, however, you hear your letterbox clatter – an unusual sound this late in the day. Your first trick or treaters of the evening, perhaps?

▶\_

#### ▶TAKE CAT

As you advance the cat arches its back even more, its fur standing on end as it hisses and spits.

You hesitate and take a step backwards. As you do, you stumble over an object on the floor behind you and fall flat on your backside.

As you scramble back to your feet, you kick the object again and catch a glimpse of what appears to be a **book**.

The cat screeches loudly and presses itself flat up against the wall.

▶\_

You carefully place the package on the table and tentatively tear a small piece of paper from one corner. You are still unnerved by the circumstances of its arrival but curious as to what is inside. The tear reveals a corner of what appears to be a large, black book.

You are about to continue when you suddenly realise what it is that's been bothering you. Although your name is scrawled across the front of the package, that's **all** that's written there. No address.

A sudden chill runs down your spine. What is this?

ANY KEY

Grimacing, you begin to search the body, looking for clues as to his identity. For a moment you think he isn't carrying anything at all, but then you notice a familiar shape tucked underneath his right hand – your **phone**!

Pushing the obvious implication to the back of your mind, you snatch it up, desperately hoping that this is the lifeline you need.

Your heart sinks as you look at it more closely, however. It's been smashed.

You throw it to the floor in frustration.

ANY KEY

removing the traditional compass directions for moving around and the concept of a limited inventory.

*Unhallowed* was released to the Spectrum community at Halloween, on the 31 October 2018. The final game had outgrown the target 48K machine after swelling to a magnificent 118K in size. Even with *The Quill's* impressive compression routines there was little option but to switch development to *PAWS*.

Without graphics it underlined the huge investment in creating a game with a mammoth amount of high quality text that appeared in the atmospheric cutscenes [more akin to reading a novel over a text adventure], location and object descriptions and responses, and extensive vocabulary.

[Blerkotron] I hate the stock response that so many adventures have, and from the outset it was my intention to have proper descriptions for as much of the in-game furniture as I could manage, even if it wasn't actually important to the game. If you examine the gate in the first location, for instance, it tells you about the gate. The gate serves no purpose – it isn't part of a puzzle, you can't even open it, so this might seem frivolous, but it helps build a picture of the world in your mind.

Every item has some snippet of information that tells you something about the protagonist, his life, his history, his habits, his personality. Yes, you could complete the entire game without reading any of it, but if you want it, it's there. [...] Given that the game didn't have any graphics I thought this was essential for scene-building.

A philosophy that would please the text adventure purists, and despite the fact that the author had started working on several of

## PHYSICAL TREAT

In October 2019 a new retro publisher BitmapSoft announced a deal with Blerkotronic to release a physical version of *Unhallowed* on cassette for the ZX Spectrum.

The publisher has acquired the skills of veteran games artist Simon Phipps [*Switchblade*, *Rick Dangerous*] to produce the game's cover artwork.

<https://www.bitmapsoft.co.uk/>

his own Spectrum arcade games with neat graphics, there was no temptation to add illustrations.

[Blerkotron] Not for a second. For one, I'm rubbish at drawing and the tools built into *PAWS* are quite restrictive. Graphics take up a lot of memory, and from the outset I wanted the game to be a story, not a picture book. Adding pictures might have made it more appealing to some people, but it would have meant compromising on the writing and I absolutely didn't want to do that – one of my main design goals was to make something more akin to modern interactive fiction within the confines of an 8-bit machine. [...] I needed as much memory as possible.

In today's digital world restricting the game to 128K Spectrums isn't that much of a drawback. The game was released in various digital formats that all could be easily played using one of the freely available emulators found on the internet. For the idealist, an audio file could be loaded into a physical machine if desired.

The attention to detail, coupled with the original premise of reducing the vocabulary and pouring effort into the presentation has paid off. *Unhallowed* is a masterpiece in programming, and possesses a modern approach to writing a classic text adventure lavished with care not usually witnessed in the presentation of text within a game.

[Blerkotron] Actually entering the text was one of the most difficult things. The colour coding is done with regular Spectrum control codes, but using them meant that I couldn't use a PC-based program to create the game – I had to do the whole thing on the Spectrum itself. I used Mark Woodmass's *SpecEmu* to do 99% of the work, mainly because it allows you to beef up the emulated Z80 clock speed, which was a big help when editing long pieces of text as *PAWS'* editor slows down dreadfully once you get more than about half a screen's worth of text in.

*Unhallowed* strikes the player as being very personal; that the characters, places, puzzles and objects feel like they mean something to the author.

[Blerkotron] I write as well as code, so I understand the importance of building characters and settings that feel 'real'. The easiest way to do that is to base them on people and situations that you have experienced yourself. The layout of the house in the game, for example, is based on the house where I grew up – that was a big help when I was first starting out as it was easy for me to create a setting which 'worked' and actually felt like a real place.

There's often a lot of 'me' in my lead characters but in this case I

careful not to force too much personality onto the protagonist – in an adventure game I think it's important that the player can identify with the character they're playing and it's hard to do that if they're too pre-written. You'll note that the game always refers to you as 'you', he doesn't have a name. That's because I wanted the player to feel like [they are] the protagonist, and [that's] a lot easier to do that if you don't name [them] and you don't give [them] too much of a personality.

There are some beautiful elements to the game. From the cinematic use of lengthy and chilling pieces of text, the TV as a kind of sliding doors portal to another dimension, to the introduction of one of the most charismatic non-human characters found in an adventure - a cat called Shadow.

In the original plan I'd included him only as part of a very brief puzzle, but my mind kept coming back to the end of Alien where Ripley essentially risks everything to go back into the ship and retrieve Jones the cat. [...] So, Shadow became *Unhallowed's* Jones – a recurring enigma with his own backstory, and a reason to keep going back and putting yourself in danger.

Players loved him too, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. The Spectrum Computing website thread that carried the release of the game drew plenty of attention, stretching to five pages of hints, tips, cries for help and appreciation of the game.

Combined with a push via Blerkotron's Twitter and itch.io page Unhallowed is estimated to have been downloaded over 600 times.

Releasing on Halloween got me the publicity that I'd been hoping for [...] [and] people genuinely seemed to take to it – including people who didn't usually enjoy adventures, which was the one goal I wasn't sure I could actually hit! So that was immensely satisfying.

All this too, despite the game's somewhat non-linear ending. It's the game's weakest moment, acknowledged by the author, and perhaps one that could be polished if he ever chose to revisit the house in a future tweaked update [the game has received two small revisions since release addressing issues such as minor bugs and typos].

A week or so out from my deadline I was struggling with the ending and added that section to provide something fresh for the finale, something surprising and new that the player would be less comfortable with after getting used to the main house. [...] I don't think it feels quite as polished as the rest of the game, [and] no-one actually complained about it, but to me it feels kind of tacked on. If

I'd had another week or so I think I could have made that bit better.

Nevertheless, given the finale flaw, and against some rather stiff competition it went onto win the "Spectrum Game of the Year" on the Planeta Sinclair website. It was a surprise, given the genre, but a welcome one, and justification of the game's quality, Blerkotron's efforts and an indication that adventures were once again back in vogue.

I'm a regular [Planeta Sinclair] reader, so to see it scoring so highly was amazing and a huge honour. [...] There had been some very strong competition, not least from the ZX-Dev competition entries, some of which were superb, so it didn't seem all that likely that a text adventure could make it. [...] I was, of course, hugely flattered and it gave me a huge boost at a time when I'd been feeling pretty low. And I guess it goes to show that we were all right – there's life in the old text adventure dog yet!

The final game has been converted to Chris Ainsley's clever *Adventuron* system, making it even more accessible to modern players, taking it away from the humble Speccy and available to play via a modern internet browser.

It certainly got a decent number of downloads, and a good handful of the people I spoke to online about the game were playing the *Adventuron* version. These are people who generally wouldn't go to the trouble of installing a Spectrum emulator to try my stuff but were more than happy to fire up an HTML page, so it was a worthwhile exercise just to widen the audience a little bit more. *Adventuron* is brilliant, and Chris was a great help and gave some very useful feedback on the game itself. I'd certainly port to it again with any future games.

It was a hint that further games could be in the works. Blerkotron has been experimenting with Gilsoft's *DAAD* suite of utilities [attempting a conversion of *A Spell of Christmas Ice*] that will enable him to work entirely via modern IDEs and still have control over the intricate presentation and other features he'd put to use so well in *PAWS*. Could we see any more games, perhaps one featuring an aforementioned feline protagonist?

The million dollar question! Yes, I think there'll be more – although I'm not sure what. [...] I don't really like sequels, so if and when it happens it's likely to be something quite different. [...] We'll see.

```
Slowly, you raise the camera and peer through the viewfinder at the creature, but then pause, unsure.
```

```
You saw it flinch at the regular light. Could something as bright as the camera flash cause it to withdraw long enough to make it to the front door?
```

```
The thought of escaping this madhouse is enticing, but it would be a huge risk - what if the door won't open? Or if it does and all that's outside is the same terrifying void you saw from the rear of the house?
```

```
And what if you just make the creature angry?
```

ANY KEY

```
The room vanishes in a brilliant white glare, and just for an instant a horrific scream tears through your mind rather than your ears.
```

```
You shriek and drop the camera, raising your hands to your head in agony. The camera shatters on impact, spitting its final photo onto the hall floor.
```

```
Dazed, you realise you are missing your only chance and open your eyes, intending to make a run for the door.
```

```
The light flickers steadily and you stop in mid-step, staring in disbelief. The creature has gone.
```

ANY KEY

```
▶GET BRANDY
You take the bottle of brandy.
```

```
▶USE MALLET WITH MIRROR
Although you see no sign of the hideous apparition in this mirror, you feel your flesh crawl anyway and a shiver runs through your entire body.
```

```
Without pausing to think, you swing the mallet into the glass with all your might.
```

```
The mirror explodes into a myriad of sparkling pieces, leaving only a few stray shards in the frame. For some inexplicable reason you immediately feel better.
```

▶\_

```
▶TAKE KNIFE
You grasp the handle carefully and pull, but the knife won't move. Frustrated, you adjust your grip and pull much harder, but somehow it still resists.
```

```
You move to try again, but this time one of the barbs on the handle pricks the skin of your finger. You yelp and pull back, sucking at the bead of blood that seeps through the cut.
```

```
A tiny drop of blood runs down the knife until it reaches the book. And as it soaks into the pages, you could swear that the knife moves a little...
```

▶\_



# COLIN JORDAN

Using his own advanced text adventure engine called *Worldscape*, **Colin Jordan** presented the ZX Spectrum with a bumbling detective duo, a very famous five and a remarkable adventure authoring system for it's spiritual successor, the SAM Coupé.

Colin Jordan was born in London in 1964 and first encountered computers when he took a Computer Studies course at school. To aid with his education, at Christmas in 1981 his Grandfather bought a Commodore PET and they explored programming together, compiling small games written in Commodore BASIC. One of the first games Colin penned using the rudimentary language was called *The Dungeons of Tharn*.

**[Colin] Oh my word! [...] It was a sort of graphical adventure with typed - in commands. I seem to remember sending a copy off to Virgin Games back in the early 1980s. Needless to say, it was rejected. I might possibly still have a copy on cassette somewhere, but would be far too embarrassed to let anyone play it or see it now!**

The rejection didn't deter Colin, and he continued to explore the genre. Inspired by playing *The Hobbit*, he completed his first text adventure, created this time, not for publication but to impress his then girlfriend.

**[Colin] The first text adventures I ever wrote featured local events and characters [...] for the amusement of my girlfriend and close friends. They featured lots of spoofs and in-jokes that would be**

totally lost on anyone who wasn't familiar with the people of places featured. There were three of these adventures in all.

That love of adventures, humour and spoof underpinned his first commercial release, called *Flukeit and Blunders in the Kidnapping of Professor Mundle*.

*Flukeit*, as the play-on-words suggests, takes an obvious inspiration from the many bumbling detectives that are popularised in film and television, such as Peter Sellers' French police detective Inspector Jacques Clouseau in the 1963 film, *The Pink Panther*, and Michael Caine and Ben Kingsley's *Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson*, satirised the 1988 film *Without a Clue*.

[Colin] *Flukeit* was supposed to be an amateur private detective, not very competent – i.e. it was a fluke that ever he ever solved anything at all! *Blunders* was just a comedic accident-prone sidekick. I always kind of had a mental image of Nigel Bruce who played Watson in the early *Sherlock Holmes* movies for him. The locations for the adventures just came completely from my warped imagination, not based on anywhere real at all.

Once he had the premise, Jordan dived into the puzzle writing. There was no fixed methodology to the narrative construction of his first game, he just started with a few initial locations and built outwards from there, matching the plot and puzzles to each scene. What he did approach in a more structured way was the game's code. He began to write an original adventure engine – something of a rarity in the adventure scene in the middle to late 80s with the ubiquitous usage of Gilsoft's adventure writing toolset amongst indie developers. Jordan called it *Worldscape*.

[Colin] My girlfriend was keen on text adventures. She purchased [Gilsoft's and Incentive's] utilities to try her hand at creating her own adventures but soon gave up. I had a look at both of them [*The Quill* and *The Graphics Adventure Writer*], but despite their clear potential, found both of them very limiting in terms of the type of adventures I wanted to write. I found *GAC* in particular very frustrating to use and full of bugs. Neither would have made *Worldscape* easy to implement.

What restricted the usage of those first generation utilities was Colin's ambition to go beyond the rudimentary non-playable-character handling that even *The Professional Adventure Writing System* offered, and implement a more native rules-based approach. He wanted to make use of his engine's in-built tables to allow *Worldscape*'s inhabitants to inherit the same abilities as the player.

[Colin] *The Hobbit* game was obviously a major influence. I liked the idea of any character in the game being able to potentially perform any task. This allows puzzles to be developed which rely on a character's personal characteristics – i.e. physical strength or certain skills or knowledge that only that particular person may have.

*Flukeit* also took inspiration from another adventuring sleuth, Melbourne House's *Sherlock* – both in the implementation of NPCs and the way that Jordan approached the design of the UI. With some intricate programming, Jordan utilised the top half of the Spectrum screen to draw graphics, and a neat proportionally represented 60+ character text display that smoothly scrolled any location text and command responses. A smaller divide across the lower half of the screen was to allow the player to input any commands. Location text varied in prose, but it was atmospheric and well written.

[Colin] The major challenges were to develop an efficient parser and to cram as much adventure as possible into the very limited space available. This meant writing text compression routines and also in the later games on the ZX Spectrum, developing an extension language that used as little memory space as possible, yet could still be edited and debugged easily – unlike routines written purely in assembler.

RAM availability in a 48K machine was paramount, and it was a fine balancing act between expanding the code that created the realism and capabilities of the intelligence in the *Worldscape* ruleset and the memory occupied by the obligatory adventure tables and text.

[Colin] [...] Memory [...] was always a constant struggle back in the days of 8 bit computers. [...] My aims were to have multiple characters capable of performing the same actions as the player in the game. In designing a game, I tended to make some characters more animated than others. Some were static while others were freely able to wander about or do their own thing. I could choose what each character might want to do. One might for example, want to pick up and carry around any object they found lying about on their travels. Some limited AI was required. I couldn't have someone passing through a closed or locked door for example!

Despite the shaky UI, several typos, and other niggles [including a very limited inventory that can only be overcome by stashing everything in the car for example] there's a terrific cast of characters in *Flukeit*, mostly taken from Jordan's imagination. There's Porkins, the somewhat abrupt Butler, a very helpful Maid, an asthenic Ghost, and a Cook who occasionally succumbs to bouts of violence. Each is freely able to wander around the game world in real-time – with an internal game clock ticking relentlessly onwards if you don't enter a command.

It genuinely makes the game slightly different each time that it is played, with characters coming and going as they please. Thankfully, with some stringent playtesting it hasn't led to the buggy and "emergent" behaviour of NPCs as found in some of its illustrious influential predecessors. One randomisation routine though, in the grounds of Radley Mansion did seem to annoy some players – especially those fond of accurately mapping games.

[Colin] The maze in *Flukeit* where locations could randomly change exits was certainly a mistake, I feel. I also seem to remember making a secret passage behind a bookcase too difficult to activate. I liked using the dumb waiter to reach new locations, however.

After being released by Top Ten Software in 1987, it was picked up by most of the mainstream magazines, featuring widely in their respective adventure columns. Mike Gerrard of *Your Sinclair* levelled a few criticisms at the game, questioning the difficulty level of the opening puzzle, the engine's slow input and responses [not so much

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*"The Hobbit* game was obviously a major influence. I liked the idea of any character in the game being able to potentially perform any task. "

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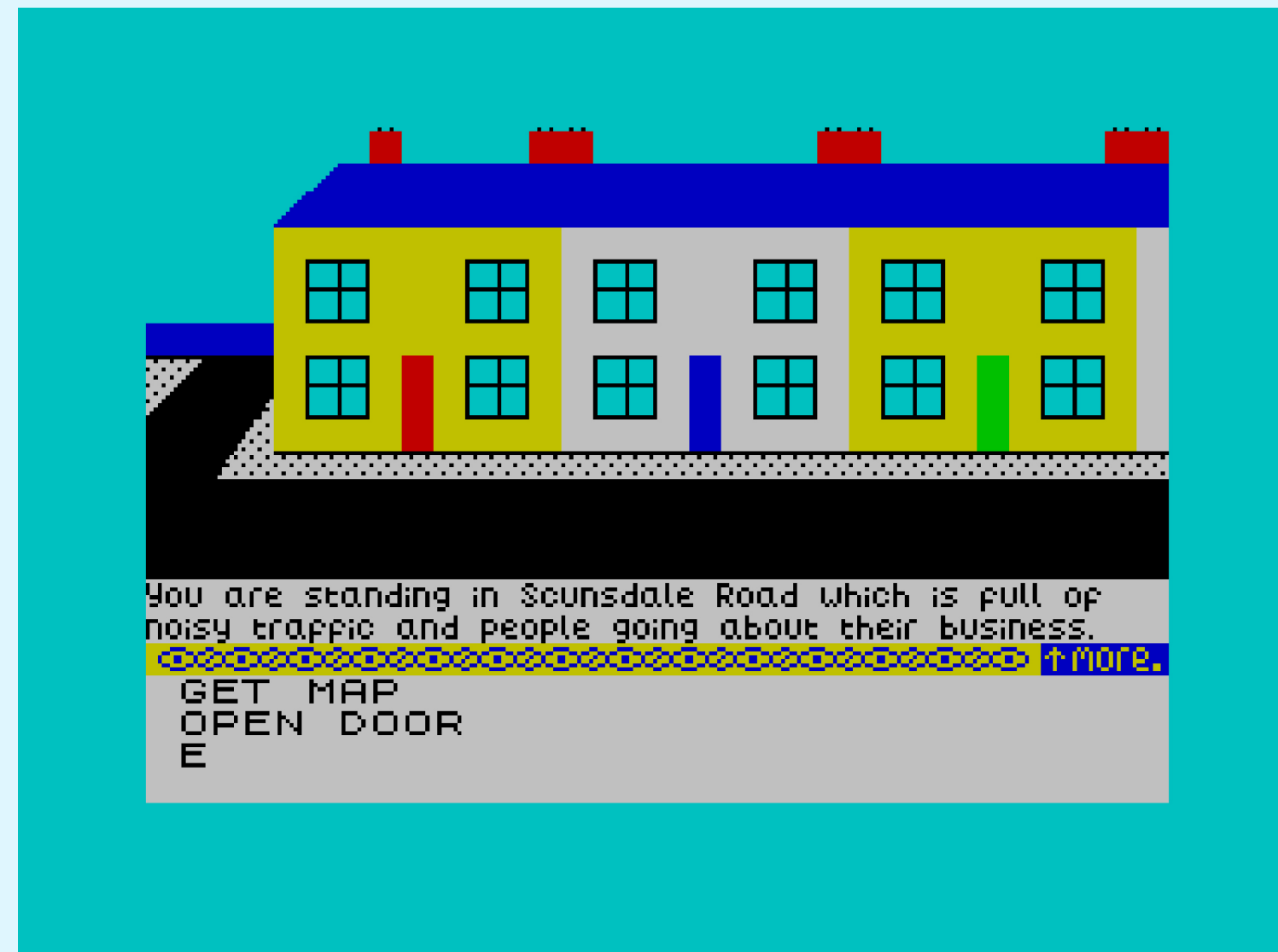
of a problem under modern emulation], those typos, and that "b\*\*tard of a maze."

[Colin] I can't really argue with any of that. Yes, *Flukeit* was my first ever published software and I was very much a novice. Myself and friends were responsible for the playtesting. The Top Ten software label who put it out really seemed to have no quality control or playtesting in place at all. They really should have picked up on the most obvious spelling errors at least!

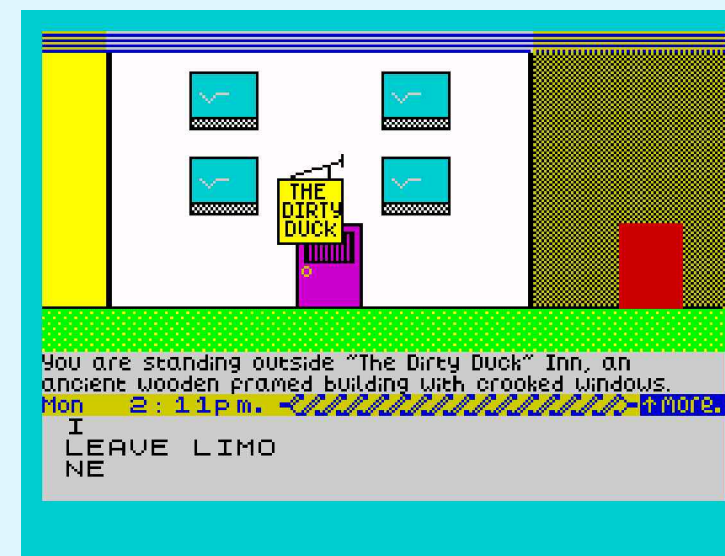
When it came to the final review scores, the adventure critics did gaze beyond the technical and schoolboy spellings and enjoyed the game and narrative.

Crash [who unfortunately overshadowed the game by featuring defacto detective adventure, *The Big Sleaze*, from Fergus McNeil in the same issue] commented that there was a "super little detective story just waiting to be discovered" and awarded the game 70%. *Your Sinclair* responded with a copycat 7/10, stating that "there's much to enjoy" and that any buyer would "feel [they've] got [their] two quid's worth."

[Colin] It was of course greatly rewarding and encouraged me to do even better with the next one. I remember the thrill of seeing my work reviewed in the computer press and still have those issues! Top Ten were responsible for the promotion and review of the game, so I didn't really have to worry about that side of things.



[*Flukeit & Blunders in the kidnapping of Professor Mundle*] Colin Jordan's first game that introduces the bumbling detective duo of Inspector Flukeit and his sidekick Blunders, along with the *Worldscape Adventure System*.



[*The Great Peepingham Train Robbery*] Flukeit and Blunders return in a second outing that utilised the quickly improving *Worldscape* system. *Peepingham* boasts a better storyline, more responsive parser, mature writing and some intricate puzzles.



[*The Famous Five: Five on a Treasure Island*] Jordan penned *Treasure Island* based on the Enid Blyton's teenage adventure novels for *Enigma Variations*. This imaginative and engaging game is best experienced on one of the colourful Amiga or Atari ST ports.



Colin has his girlfriend to thank for his publication link with Top Ten Software. She had been playing a text adventure game called *The Secret of St. Brides* written by the enigmatic County Donegal developer St Bride's School. He sent an evaluation copy of *Flukeit* to the address on the cassette label, and eventually it found its way to Maynard International who were about to start the Top Ten label. *Flukeit* was selected as one of its initial releases.

A few copies of the Top Ten release occasionally appear on internet auction sites and can be bought for a reasonable amount of money. There's also plenty of references to letters, and hints and tips in magazines which suggests some success for the game.

[Colin] **Top Ten was a budget label. The games sold for only £1.99 each, but because they were cheap, they sold loads. I remember seeing it for sale in WH Smith one time. I made only a measly 10p on each game sold, but still made enough from the sales to buy myself a nice high-end Hi-Fi system with my royalties. When I started selling the game myself, I'd often get good feedback from the fans or pleas for help with the puzzles.**

Colin set to work on writing another adventure starring the hapless deducing duo, and so Flukeit and Blunders returned in their next game, *The Great Peepingham Train Robbery*. The story begins with Flukeit once again sat in his comfortable study when the telephone rings. On the blower is Inspector Hoaden from Scotland Yard with a curiously ambiguous message about another case, recommending that our detective hovers his magnifying glass over the sleepy village of Peepingham where thieves had robbed a train.

[Colin] **After *Flukeit*, I was keen to write a follow up. I was fond of the characters and my programming skills had developed in the meantime, and so I knew I could make a better job of it than the first release. The storyline just came out of my warped mind, like everything else does!**

When Colin told Top Ten he was working on a further game, they snapped up the rights to publish it. With this confidence, more time was invested in making the *Worldscape* system even better than the first game.

There was a noticeable improvement in the speed of input and command parsing, and the real-time clock was included again- only this time displayed on-screen in a move inspired by Philip Mitchell's *Sherlock*. A 128K version was specially created, with additional graphics and a welcome RAMSAVE facility.

[Colin] **It occurred to me [for the 128K game] that I could use a single buffer space for the graphics and then page in each picture from the additional RAM every time it was required. Therefore *Peepingham* could have loads of graphics without each one eating into valuable memory used for the actual gameplay.**

Programming the second game proved to be a challenge. Colin's ambition pushed up against the limits of the technology, and he commented in an interview in issue 12 of ZAT fanzine that "*Peepingham* was exceptionally difficult and took me about 11 months to write". It was a momental ask to continue coding a custom adventure engine and be the writer rolled into one.

[Colin] **The biggest problem by far was cramming as much as I**

**wanted into the very limited memory space available. Every byte was fought for! *Peepingham* used substantial text compression and a sort of pseudo code which compressed certain routines and instructions into as little space as possible.**

*Peepingham*, with Colin's longer development time and better coding experience made a much improved game, in terms of plot, size, complexity and speed. Unfortunately, Top Ten were having financial difficulties and pulled out of the games market shortly after its release in August 1989. It was a shame, as a preview in Your Sinclair generated plenty of interest with fans.

Without a publisher, Colin took matters into his own hands and created a software label called Axxent Software. He took inspiration from a teenage pipe dream to form an electronic pop band he wanted to christen Axxent Opaque [more on this later].

[Colin] **The name just came to me and doesn't really mean anything at all - I just thought that combination of words and spelling seemed interesting.**



Colin's girlfriend at the time, Shirleyann Davies was keeping a keen interest in the games he was producing. She was always contributing ideas for plots, themes and puzzles, and being a keen Enid Blyton fan she handed him a copy of *The Famous Five: Five on a Treasure Island*, suggesting that it would make a great adventure.

It was an intriguing proposition for Colin, and taking on the project would mean *Flukeit* and *Blunders* would be left behind, without any further games ever getting to the planning stage.



[Colin] I was a bit sceptical [about the book] at the time and will admit, I read it somewhat reluctantly, but soon realised it would indeed make an ideal [adventure] game. Obviously *The Famous Five* required a license and approval by the rights holders to be released and I knew I'd need the backing of an established software label to achieve this. Mike Gerrard, bless him, was initially a bit sceptical the game would ever see the light of day when I told him of my plans to adapt the book, but luckily *Enigma [Variations]* were keen as soon as they saw the game, and secured the rights.

Colin's approach to Harrogate publisher *Enigma Variations* was driven by his recent purchase of a SAM Coupé computer. The computer, developed by small British manufacturer Miles Gordon Technology was proffered as the natural successor to the ZX Spectrum range of micros, boasting some backwards compatibility but with native enhanced graphics and sound. It was a good fit for an adventure writer proficient in a language supported by the new computer that sought to expand and enhance his own technology.

[Colin] I wanted to give my support to the new machine. At the time, *Enigma* was the only main label producing SAM software, so it was natural that I submitted the game to them. Inspired by the ability to change characters in the *Lord Of The Rings* text adventure, I realised that *Famous Five* would also work well if the player could also switch between the human characters, allowing them to split up etc. This allows *Famous Five* to be played as a multi-player game with each player taking turns and controlling his/her own character every few turns or so.

The plot for *Five on a Treasure Island* was mysterious. Julian, Dick and Anne were holidaying with their cousin George and her dog, Timothy. Being inquisitive children, they are soon off on an adventure, exploring the nearby Kirrin Island, drawn by the ruined castle on its perch. Once on the Island, they stumbled on clues leading them to believe a great treasure had been hidden away

somewhere in the castle, and they set off in pursuit of the prize.

[Colin] The novel was surprisingly easy to adapt into a text adventure and it follows the plot of the book quite closely. I don't recall leaving out anything substantial. Shirleyann was involved in the playtesting of the game throughout its development, and as a fan of the books, made sure I had the feel for the characters and period just right.

Shirleyann's involvement, and subject knowledge would prove to be invaluable. There was a balance to be made with the game's difficulty. The books were marketed as suitable for 8-11 year olds, so there was an obvious lean towards writing for the younger and more inexperienced player. But, it was a maturing game market, and adventures in the past aimed at a juvenile audience had limited success - most likely due to the limited disposable income of that demographic.

[Colin] Nobody really stipulated anything to me, but I was aware that because of the subject matter, the game was likely to have a younger audience. I didn't actually make any of the puzzles drastically easy, but tried to ensure there were enough clues and information in the game so that they could be solved without too much trouble.

Then there was Blyton's Estate themselves. Credited with contributing to the development of the game was one Darrell Walters. He was actually the holder of the rights at the time, and despite the mention the Estate's involvement the influence on the writing and design was limited.

[Colin] They just approved a videotape recording of the game being played through, once the game was completed. They never had issues with anything I'd done with the characters, so I guess they were happy with my portrayals.

Development was started on the ZX Spectrum as a testbed, further evolving the tried-and-trusted *Worldscape* system to incorporate virtually every feature of a modern text adventure parser into its engine. Pronouns, ALL, EVERYTHING, a useful VERB function and the aforementioned ability to switch between the protagonists [and



for a delightful twist that included the dog] at will were all added to the parser [with the SAM and 16-bits more versatile than the 8-bit versions] and incorporated into the puzzle chain.

*Five* used the ability to switch characters very effectively, and drawing on the strengths and weaknesses of the characters from the book, certain were more likely to succeed when playing as Julian over



Anne because of their relative strengths, or by playing as George who may have been friends with a character that held important information. There were some good old fashioned puzzles that could only be completed by switching between protagonists in two different locations.

[Colin] A good puzzle should never depend on obscure or awkward vocabulary. That's why I usually include a VERBS command which gives you a list of the commonly used and recognised verbs and commands that are accepted by the game. Pronouns can be useful and where possible should be recognised . ie. GET INTO BOAT as well as BOARD BOAT or PUT BATTERIES INSIDE TORCH as well as INSERT BATTERIES etc.

Once underway, Colin switched development to the Coupé, taking a further 3 months for the game to come to fruition. He returned to the Spectrum edition and attempted to reverse engineer some of the enhancements he'd crafted in the SAM version back to its less



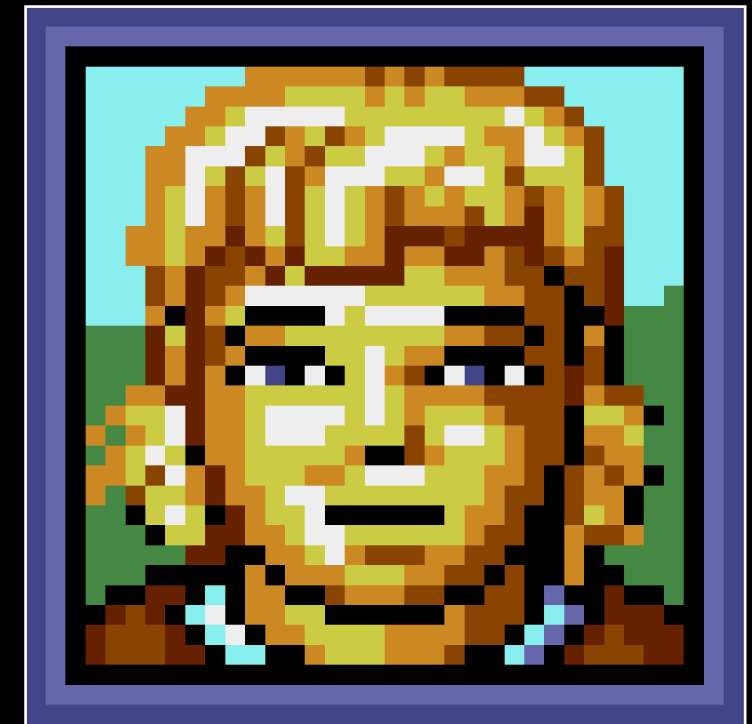
powerful cousin.

[Colin] When [the Spectrum version] was about 90% complete, it was a quick and easy process to port it across to the SAM and complete it there - memory was not so much of an issue. It was a much easier game to write than *Peepingham* was - as a lot of the ground work programming-wise had already been done for previous games. Then based on the completed SAM version, the Spectrum version was later finished for release. But as always, the problem with the Spectrum was squeezing it all in. Even so, in the end, to save space, I think I had to lose one or two minor locations on the Spectrum version.

Conversions were written for the Amstrad CPC464 and Commodore 64, each with better and more lush graphics than the limited Sinclair version [which only supported graphics on 128K machines]. The most polished and beautifully presented versions [with high definition location illustrations and expanded puzzles] were based upon the SAM version and were ported to the more powerful Atari ST and Commodore Amiga computers.

[Colin] I oversaw the development of all the other versions and provided a code listing for them to work from. The same guy did both the ST and Amiga versions and really did an excellent job. [...] I designed all of the location graphics for the SAM version, but for all other versions, *Enigma* commissioned other people to do them, which saved me a lot of work!

Reviews were consistently around the 70% mark across all the platforms, with surprisingly favourable 16-bit reviews. Amiga Format [awarding 73%] thought that game had a "distinctive style" and was a



"reasonable adventure". The reviewers in *CU Amiga* magazine were kinder, though only giving the game 75%, saying "*Five* [...] is a very risky licence which has been produced in an absolutely super way." But, behind the kind words, there was no denying that the shelf life for adventures was almost at an end.

[Colin] By then Spectrum software was rapidly diminishing and the writing was on the wall. Technology changed. 8 bit and 16 bit home computers disappeared and the PC and home consoles dominated instead. With almost unlimited memory and hardware graphic acceleration, games became much more visual and less cerebral. This has led to a stagnation of ideas and innovation. Sadly, most games nowadays seem to be only occupied with car racing or shooting and massacring people.

This was noticeable in an undercurrent running beneath the 16-bit

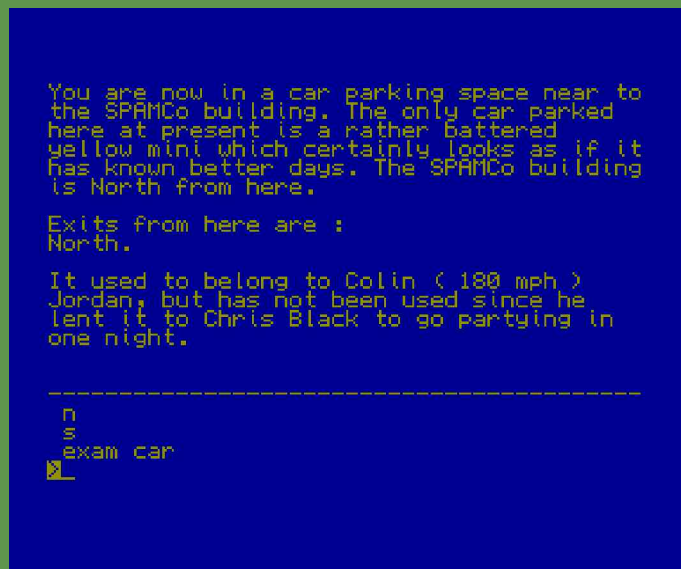
# SAM ADVENTURE SYSTEM

Colin Jordan adapted his *Worldscape* engine into a commercial adventure utility, the *SAM Adventure System* [SAS] released in January 1993 for the maligned SAM Coupé computer. SAS could only run on an upgraded Coupé with 512kb of RAM, and Jordan made use of the enhanced hardware capabilities of the SAM, allowing budding adventure authors the ability to include colourful graphics, a multitude of screen modes and reams of text in games that could be over 700K in size. Like its peers from



Level 9, Magnetic Scrolls and Infinite Imaginations, SAS used a three stage process to create adventures. Firstly an editor maintained source files, usually in text, which were then compiled and finally built with an interpreter for a target platform into a standalone game.

By the time SAS was launched, the text adventure genre was in the doldrums, but with the support of the Sam Adventure Club a



handful of games were produced such as *Flight of Fantasy*, *Day Dream* and *The Occult Connection*.

<https://www.worldofsam.org/products/sam-adventure-system>

reviews that critics felt that adventures didn't belong in the 90s. Unashamedly, the staff at Amiga Action admitted to hating the game [despite the review] and tried to give away the review copy they'd received in a lacklustre competition. In September 1992, not much more than a year after the ZX Spectrum release of the game, it was given away on a Your Sinclair covertape. Enigma's hopes for a series of games [they had subtitled the game, *Famous Five 1*] were dashed.

**[Colin] Enigma, having bought the rights, decided to move away from computer software and started working on Game Boy and console games instead. I never actually suggested to Enigma it was to be the first of a series, and in fact would have probably struggled to make a decent text adventure out of the next book.**

Colin moved away from adventure authoring when he joined SAM software developer Revelation Software. He wrote a version of the popular Spectrum arcade game *SPLAT!* and used *Worldscape* to develop the *SAM Adventure System* [aka SAS], considering it one of his finest programming achievements.

He has no plans to return to the world of adventures and spends his free time playing with electronic group Axxent Opaque.

**[Colin] Our philosophy as a band is to produce and perform electronic music with an organic live element and not rely on computers to sequence or arrange it beforehand. We are very much performers and there is always a largely improvised element to what we do. No two live performances will ever be quite the same. We interact with hardware on stage rather than use pre-arrangements written on a computer.**

We've been going a couple of years now, released a couple of CDs and are tending to play a couple of festivals or events each year. We're now starting to build up a bit of a following who appreciate what we do, which is nice for us and makes this self-indulgent hobby of ours very rewarding and satisfying! For more information, please search for **AXXENT OPAQUE** on Facebook, where we have a band page.



## DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

Inept duo Inspector Flukeit and Blunders accidentally open a porthole at high tide, sinking their ship. Fellow passenger **Colin Jordan** swims ashore to the desert island and is all alone with a single power socket and five text adventures for company.

My five have to be *The Hobbit*, *Sherlock*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Pawn* and *Sherriff Gunn*. These inspired me so much, and I am sure that there still remains much in these games that I have yet to find and explore.

*The Pawn* was an adventure I never finished. It had lots of detail and fun things to find. *Sherriff Gunn* was a game I released on my own Axxent label that is fun to play. It wasn't one of mine, I should add.

# KNIGHT ORC

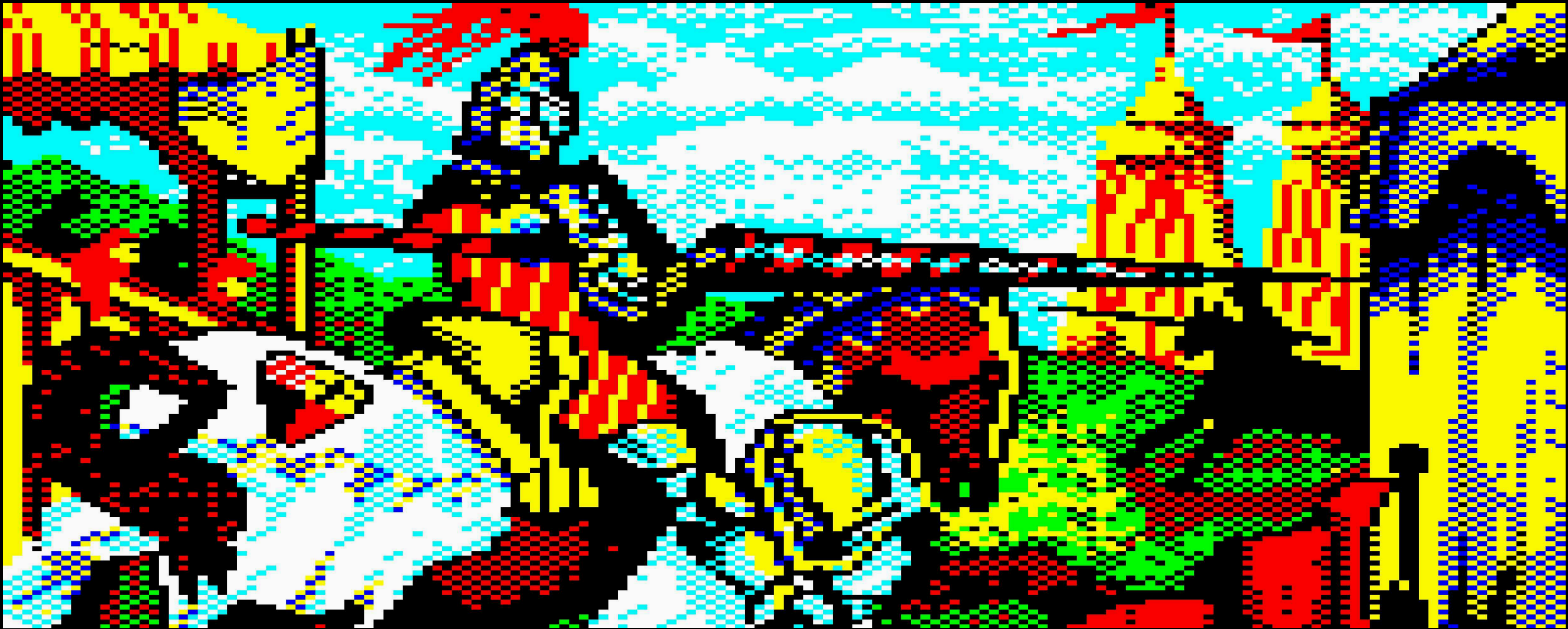
A clue on an old adventure catalogue price list led to a twenty year search for Level 9's missing adventure for the BBC Micro. Now, after an eagle-eyed discovery on a museum website and the recovery work of the Acorn community, *Knight Orc* can be enjoyed in its resplendent 16-colour MODE 2 glory.

Two events hugely influenced the direction of the British adventure game market in the mid-1980s. The first was the arrival of 16-bit home computers from Atari and Commodore, expanding the cramped working memory that had been available to 8-bit programmers to a mind boggling 512K. Alongside this additional RAM, the ST and Amiga also featured a built-in disk drive. Whereas in the past British developers could only look on with envy at US companies such as Infocom exploiting this technology, the power of random-access media, which crammed with 700KB of adventure data or location graphics was now in their grasp.

The second tremor came in the form of developer Magnetic Scrolls. They were the first British company to really capitalise on this

Format: BBC Micro Master 128K or BBC Micro B 48K  
Developer: Level 9  
Original Publisher: Rainbird Software Ltd  
Original Multi-Format Release Date: 1987  
Discovery Date: 2019





[Above] This sumptuous picture greets Grindleguts as he awakes at the start of the game. Level 9 use a neat dual screen mode - split below the location graphic. The top is the BBC's 16-colour low resolution graphics mode and the text is in a high resolution mode.

seismic shift in technology, and their first game, *The Pawn*, released in 1986 devastated the competition. It delivered an Infocom-beating parser combined with jaw-dropping graphics that were splashed across every magazine cover and computer shop demonstration machine throughout the land.

*The Pawn* slapped a gauntlet in the face of the undisputed Kings of British adventuring, Level 9, and the band of usurping upstarts led by Anita Sinclair threatened to dethrone the Austin Brothers. To add insult to injury, *Scrolls* were fellow stable-mates of Level 9, having both signed contracts with the charismatic Tony Rainbird to create games for his [reluctantly!] self-titled publisher.

*The Pawn* came along after Level 9 released its first games for Rainbird. The rehash of earlier releases under the trilogy compilations *Jewels of Darkness* and *Silicon Dreams* looked obsolete and old-hat in comparison. The Austins realised quickly that to have the impact they wanted in the 16-bit market they had to change direction, and their next game, *Knight Orc*, became their most important.

To further challenge text adventure tradition, in *Knight Orc* they cast the protagonist as one of the genre's traditional adversaries, a rather

unpleasant Orc. Set across three parts of varying difficulty, *Orc* was published on the ST and Amiga and ported back to the 8-bit market with versions for the Amstrad, C64, Atari, MSX and ZX Spectrum. There was the expectation of a BBC Micro release, as Level 9 had been huge supporters of the Acorn machine - putting every game until this point onto the Cambridge micro - but it never arrived.

[Mike Austin] My memories are extremely vague. *Knight Orc* was released via Rainbird, and I'm fairly sure that [a version for the] BBC Master wasn't part of the original contract.

The publishing relationship disintegrated when Tony Rainbird, the driving force and enthusiasm behind the games left the company. With Rainbird departed, it seemed that any possible plan for the BBC Micro version of *Knight Orc* went with him. The next compilation in their release schedule, *Time & Magik* was dropped and the contract was terminated by mutual agreement.

*Time and Magik* was published by Level 9's next publisher Mandarin, and intriguingly, a BBC Micro version was delivered. Bob Redrup, The Mad Hatter, commented in the February 1989 issue of *Micro User* that "the positive reaction to *Time and Magik* encouraged the Austins to re-enter the BBC Micro market. We must ensure they never leave it

again." And encouraged they were, as Level 9 did return to the Beeb, porting *Lancelot* [once again with Mandarin], *Gnome Ranger*, *Ingrid's Back!* and finally *Scapeghost*.

But what happened to *Knight Orc*? Rumours of a BBC version started to emerge with the inception of the internet. In the early 2000s discussions on several BBC forums centred on a Level 9 catalogue price list that was bundled with *Ingrid's Back!* On close inspection there is an entry for *Knight Orc* for the BBC and Master retailing at £14.95. There was some suggestion that the price list was erroneous. For cross-platform games, publishers would save on production costs by printing a single version of the instructions for multiple computers - it made economic sense. Even a single version of the box artwork was a norm, with the platform changed by the use of a strategically placed "machine-specific" sticker to cover the original print. On all versions of *Knight Orc*, loading and gameplay instructions are given for every conceivable platform - Amstrad, Apple, Atari, Commodore, MSX, Spectrum, but not the BBC.

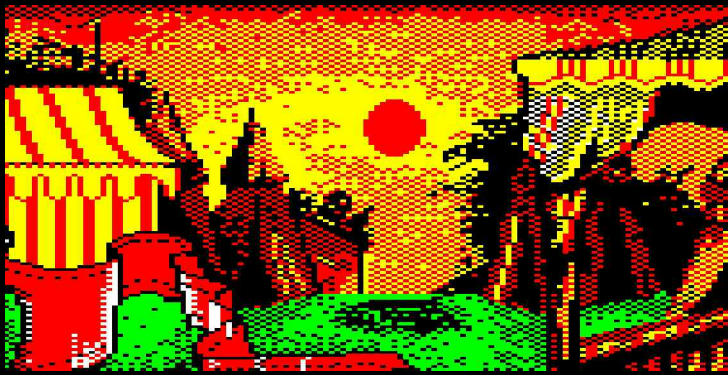
Dave "Arcadian" Moore, founder of the Acorn-oriented Stairway to Hell website and Stardot forums followed up the threads by contacting both Mike Austin and the BBC version's potential programmer [who had been responsible for the *Gnome Ranger* and

## THE SEARCH FOR THE LOST ORB

Whilst searching through a raft of old BBC Micro disks, ex-Superior Software developer Kevin Edwards stumbled across an undocumented adventure called *Search for the Lost Orb*.

No one had ever heard of it or knew who had written it, but it seemed to be of commercial quality. The forum thread and discussion where you can download and play the game is:

<https://stardot.org.uk/forums/viewtopic.php?f=40&t=15267>



[Left] A comparison between the new BBC Micro graphics from the expanded and Master version [Left column] and the original scanned Godfrey Dowson artwork on the Amiga [Right column].

[Above] *Knight Orc*, the BBC Playtest Version as found in an Atari edition of the game housed at the Centre for Computing History. [Picture courtesy of Dave Moore]

Lancelot ports] Mike Bryant. In a tantalising reply, the Austins and Bryant insisted that the BBC version was never released but was in existence. After a promise to search their loft for the code, communications ended, and the conversations drifted into obscurity.

[Mike Austin] I think we probably did [the] Master version later on, possibly after Rainbird pulled out of the games business, though I can't recall the details.

Fast forward to February 2019, and The Centre for Computing History [a computer museum based in Cambridge] were in the process of archiving the latest additions to their collections. During the process they posted a note about the Atari version of *Knight Orc* in their possession. Included in their retail game box was a 5.25" disc that was labelled as being a playtest copy for the BBC Micro. At the time the museum had no idea that the disc could potentially contain something that BBC Micro enthusiasts had long been searching for, and that it was probably the only copy of the game left in existence.

The museum's website post about the *Knight Orc* game caught the eye of text adventure author and writer Gareth Pitchford, who was browsing the centre's online archive. He reposted the information in a thread on the Stardot forums and it ignited memories of the original discussion.

Dave Moore once again picked up the investigation with the museum, and it was several months later, in September 2019, at a meeting of an Acorn and BBC User Group being held at the centre, when Dave and his fellow experts were able to view the disc in person.

Posting to the Stardot forum Dave commented "It [...] contained a hint request sheet that had been hand-marked as being for the BBC

Master 128. This [led] us to believe it was a review copy, supplied inside a retail box that happened to be for Atari computers. [...] It was immediately clear that the disc was the real deal."

The group carefully managed to archive the disk, extracting both sides typical of the Level 9 BBC micro dual-format – one for the adventure data and the other side containing the location graphics. The game probably was close to commercial release, as it has its copy-protection activated – which perhaps would be something that was only mastered at the last minute and certainly not be in a test or review release.

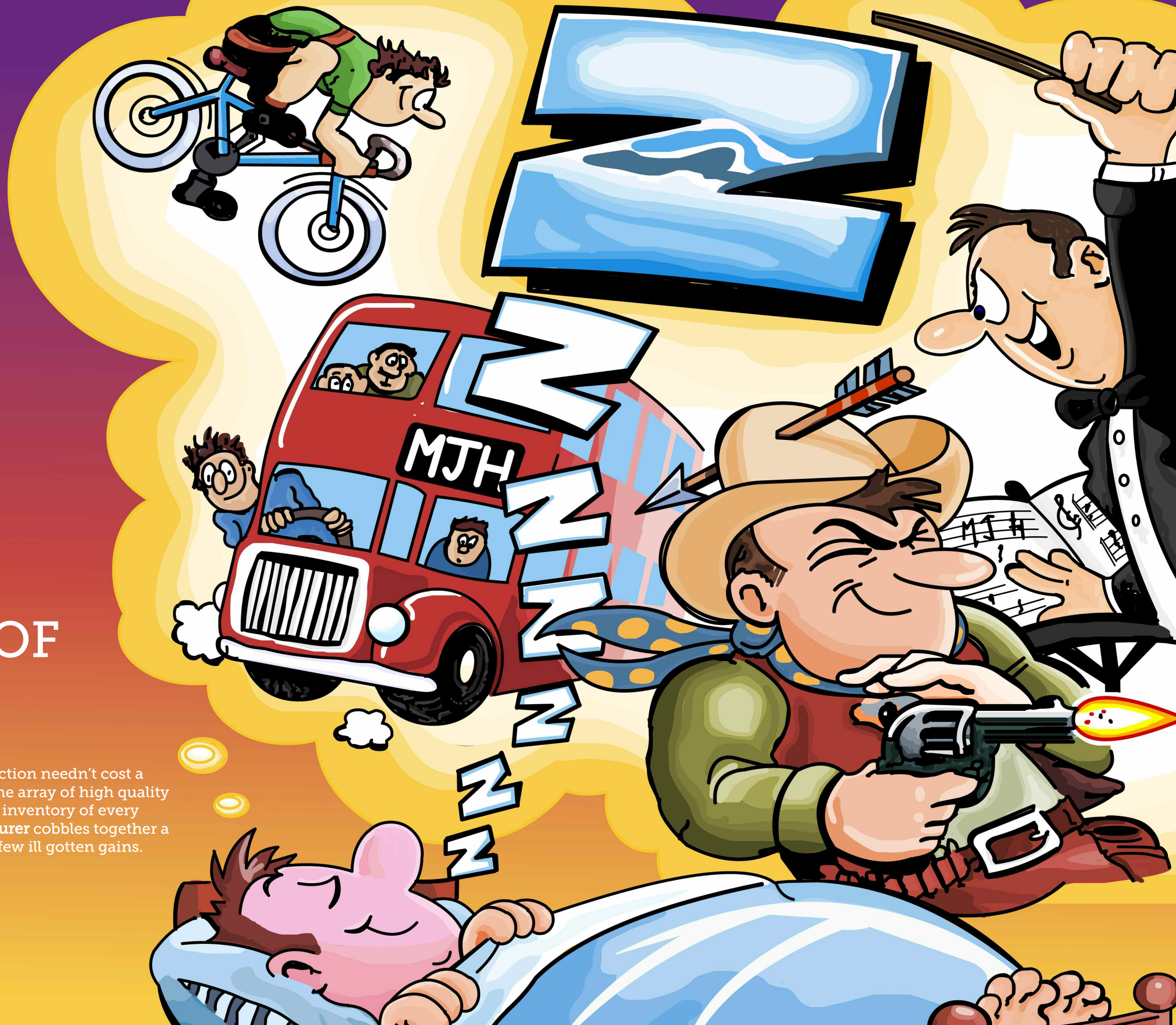
Richard Hewson, an advocate of British adventures and former Rainbird employee commented "This is terrific news and a testament to the hard work and dedication made by the community. [...] Unfortunately, Level 9 and Rainbird had already parted ways when I joined TelecomSoft, so I have nothing anecdotal to add. However, I'm curious as to whom the test disk might have come from, as my colleagues have no recollection of testing that version back in the day so presumably this was via the developer's end of things, rather than the publisher's."

*Knight Orc* remains one of the most unique adventures ever published, and one of Level 9's best. If you own an expanded original BBC Micro, or a Master, or fancy playing via the magic of a modern emulator then head to the Stardot forums or the Level 9 Memorial website where the game has been made available to download. As for the continuing interest in the Level 9 back catalogue, the last word is left to Mike.

[Mike Austin] It's really cool that people still get excited about the games!

# TWO PIECES OF EIGHT

Acquiring a great text adventure for your collection needn't cost a chestful of golden treasure. Over the years a fine array of high quality games have been released at a price to suit the inventory of every adventurer's leather purse. **The Classic Adventurer** cobbles together a selection of the best games available for just a few ill gotten gains.





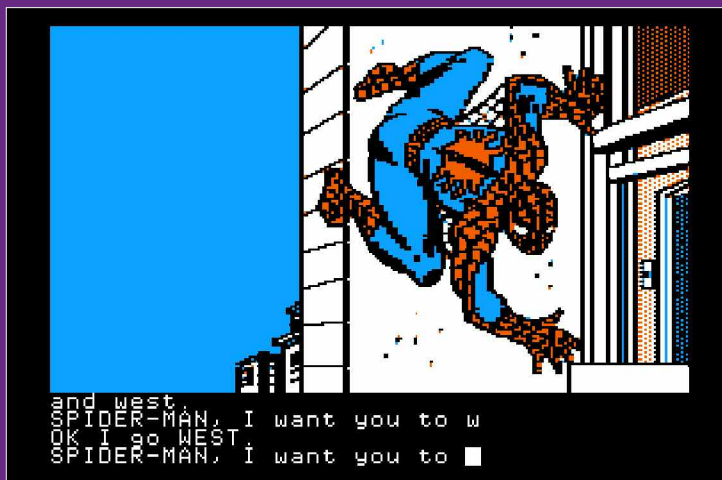
## SUBSUNK

Firebird, 1985

Using *The Quill*, Peter Torrance built upon his experience writing *Robo-City* (an apocalyptic science fiction tale of rampaging robots) for the *Spectrum Computing* tape magazine and delivered *Subsunk* for British Telecom's Firebird label.

As the title of the game suggests, the player finds themselves alone, stranded upon a nuclear submarine after the crew is taken hostage. With the vessel scuppered, it's race to be rescued by somehow sending a distress signal to GHQ. It's a tense race through around 50 locations, all described with an increasingly claustrophobic and taut narrative. Torrance manages to throw in some challenging puzzles, but they are, in the main well paced and sometimes aided by his somewhat haphazard hint system.

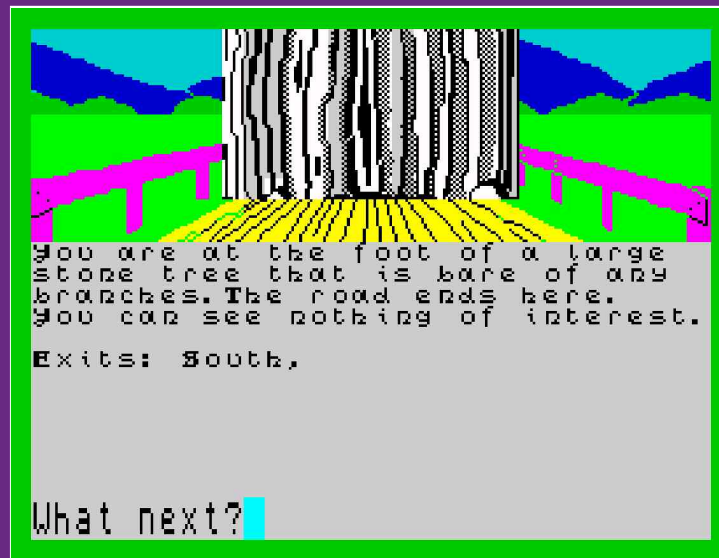
*Subsunk* may be a very early and crude effort (especially the illustrations), but it remains a favourite title for many, being one of the first games of the genre that they spent their pocket money on.



## SPIDERMAN

Americana, 1985

A Mastertronic premium budget label that licenced US Gold properties, Americana released Scott Adam's *Questprobe* adventure series as part of the deal they forged with Adventure International UK. *Spiderman* features the coolest character of the bunch, and is perhaps the best adventure with some recognisable, and colourful graphics, combined with an enhanced parser. In the game, the player takes control of Spider-Man, Peter Parker's crime-fighting alter-ego, as he takes on Mysterio and prepares to save the world. It was well worth the small change to collect a great adventure.

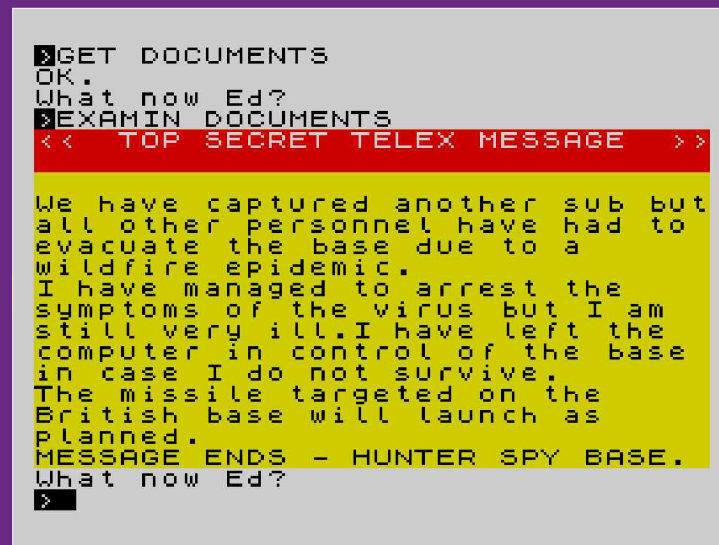


## EXCALIBUR: SWORD OF KINGS

Alternative Software, 1987

Roger Hulley's Pontefract publisher Alternative Software established a reputation for releasing quality original and re-release 8-bit adventure games. *Excalibur: Sword of Kings* is one such original release from Ian Smith and Shaun McClure. It portrays the fairytale of Camelot and sends the player on a quest to release King Arthur who has been imprisoned by the evil sorceress Crania.

Though the game is not taxing, it's well-written and captures the atmosphere of a by-gone era of chivalry, damsels and Knights of the Round Table. It was well worth the couple of quid it cost, standing out from the *Quill'd* crowd thanks to its custom adventure engine and colourful, neat, bitmap-style illustrations.



## SEABASE DELTA

Firebird, 1985

Peter Torrance and Colin Liddle wrote *Seabase Delta* as a direct sequel to their earlier hit *Subsunk*. Continuing the story, reporter Ed Lines still can't escape despite sending the required distress signal from the submarine Sea Lion. Having intercepted the signal, aliens capture the sub and entrap it in Seabase Delta where Ed has to unravel the mysteries of the base and escape in a mini-sub. The incredibly honest screenshot that adorned the packaging of the earlier *Subsunk* was replaced with a much more menacing and attention grabbing Octopus, and *Delta* was another good value £1.99 Firebird cheapie, full of atmosphere and decent writing.

## BOOK OF THE DEAD

Essential Myth, 1987

Essential Myth were a Tewkesbury based developer who penned a brace of adventures for the ZX Spectrum computer. *Book of the Dead* was their first commercial release, created by the team of Lee Hodgson, Mark Davies and Andrew Dean, all of whom shared development duties.

Written using GAC, the game embraces a myriad of Egyptian mythologies and casts the player as Kteth, a minor demigod seeking a way into the afterlife and immortality. It's a novel twist, where the player actively seeks death, and the game is beautifully put together by the Myth team with some neat customisations of GAC. So much so that it was picked up by CRL and re-released with a few minor graphical tweaks, polish and ports to the C64 and Amstrad.



## MATT LUCAS

Players Software, 1987

We featured Alex Williams' answer to Miami Vice, *Matt Lucas*, in our look at detective adventures back in issue 04. It's one of the better GAC'd games, with a quick parser, neat character set and decent graphics - albeit text-only on the Commodore 64.

Players were a competent budget house, and *Matt Lucas* was a fine addition to anyone's collection if you wanted a game that perfectly captured the popular US cop themes of the 80s.



## Zzzz

Mastertronic, 1986

Developers started experimenting with hybrid user interfaces during the mid-eighties in an attempt to bridge the gap between the joystick-wielding arcade player and text input purist. Clive Wilson and Les Hogarth, working together as Softel, were deft exponents of this technique and created *Zzzz* - a sweet little adventure that explores a dream world full of random themes, places and puzzles.



## CUSTERDS QUEST

Alpha-Omega Software, 1986

After sitting his O-Levels in 1986, Craig Davies, a lover of all things satirical, created *Custerds Quest* during an intensive two week period at his keyboard using Gilsoft's *The Quill* and *Illustrator*.

Craig had many adventuring influences. Alongside his love for serious adventures such as *The Hobbit*, his sense of mischief was encouraged by playing tongue-in-cheek titles from St. Bride's and Fergus McNeil's Delta 4 - specifically citing *The Boggit* as being one of his favourite games. "I think the comedic spoof approach just suited my sense of humour" Craig told Retro Gamer's Graeme Mason, "and undoubtedly at the time I wanted to emulate the kind of game that Delta 4 were renowned for producing."

Davies produced a game that was a fitting stablemate to his illustrious peers. *Quest* followed the main protagonist, Sir Coward De Custerd, a gallant knight who had to traipse across a land to defeat an evil Necromancer in the Tower of Doom. It delivered a terrific game full of lampooning fun and some humorous and well written prose.

Since CRL had published Delta 4's *Bored of the Rings*, Davis dispatched a copy to them in the hope they'd find *Quest* attractive since it was from a similar mould. They did, but released it via their budget label Alpha Omega run by Ashley Hildebrandt. Six months later, CRL revamped the brand and re-published a revised *Quest*, benefitting from *The Quill's* new text compression utility *The Press* to squeeze in even more gags. "I added a heap more text, jokes and responses to silly things you might type in," Craig explained to Mason.

Make sure you play this sharply-written parody that received a well-deserved Crash Smash from Derek Brewster himself.



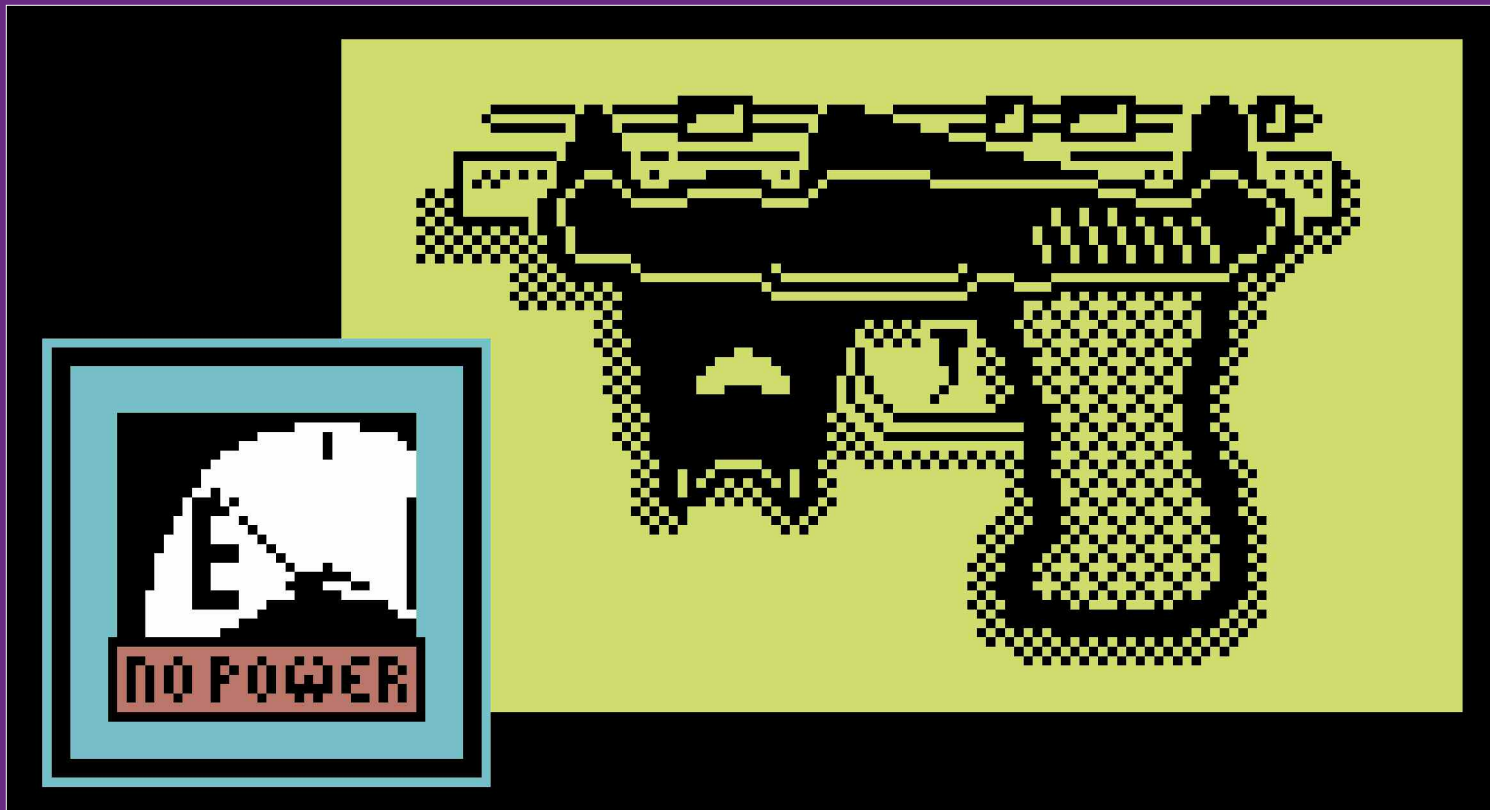


## TWIN KINGDOM VALLEY

*Bug Byte, 1983*

Okay, so Trevor Hall's iconic *Twin Kingdom Valley* was originally released as a full price game by Bug-Byte, but it became so popular that after the Liverpoolian publisher had been bought out by Argos Press Software Group it was re-released for a measly £2.95.

It's an masterpiece of exemplar programming and adventure craft from Hall, featuring impressive location graphics [even on the 32K Acorn Electron] and a fabulous array of intelligent characters and creatures that freely roam the valley.



## RIGEL'S REVENGE

Mastertronic, 1987

Smart Egg software were Nigel Brookes, Ron Harris, Said Hassan and Ross Harris. They had a good pedigree in adventure authoring, having collaborating as Smart Egg for the original *The Serf's Tale* and enhancing versions of Harvey Lodder's *The Quest for the Golden Eggcup* and Mike White's *Quann Tulla* [released as *Federation*].

*Rigel's Revenge* cast the player as Harper, a journalist who finds himself embroiled in the midst of war on the colony of Rigel V, between its indigenous peoples, the Rigellians, and the imperialistic Federation. The Rigellians have a Doomsday Machine and threaten to unleash it unless the Federation leave the planet. So, it's up to you to find their headquarters and disable the device at any cost.

Using a modified version of *The Quill*, *Rigel* was a departure for Smart Egg, dispensing with their usual fantasy scenarios for a hard boiled, desolate science-fiction story of future human conflict.

## SPYTREK

Americana, 1986

*Spytrek* was another release from Americana coded by the prolific Peter Torrance, whose contributions to budget adventures could fill a large portion of the entries in our celebratory section.

This story is straight from the pages of an Ian Fleming novel, in *Spytrek's* case subtitled "Boldly spy where most spies have spied before." In *Spytrek*, we have a very familiar story - a government secret agent, his identity compromised, hides secret plans and you're Mike Rodot (not the slickest of secret agent names), dispatched to France to retrieve them.

Using *GAC* this time [which would become Torrance's tool of choice for future games], instead of *The Quill*, a more tardy response time and clumsy parser await, but there are plenty of high resolution graphics, some humour, and a hint that the game was originally written as the final adventure in a *Subsunk/Seabase Delta* trilogy.

dog settled down to gnaw the bone.

▶U

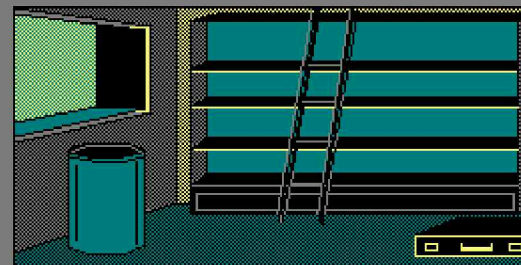
Harper paused. He could hear strange scuffling noises coming from the shadows. The little dog gave an anxious yelp, grabbed the bone and disappeared over the rubble.

Several large dogs appeared...

They must have been a mutated Rigellian strain. They certainly didn't look like any dogs Harper had ever seen before. Too big, for a start. Too many claws and teeth.

Harper's collar suddenly felt a little tight. "Nice doggies!" he ventured without much conviction.

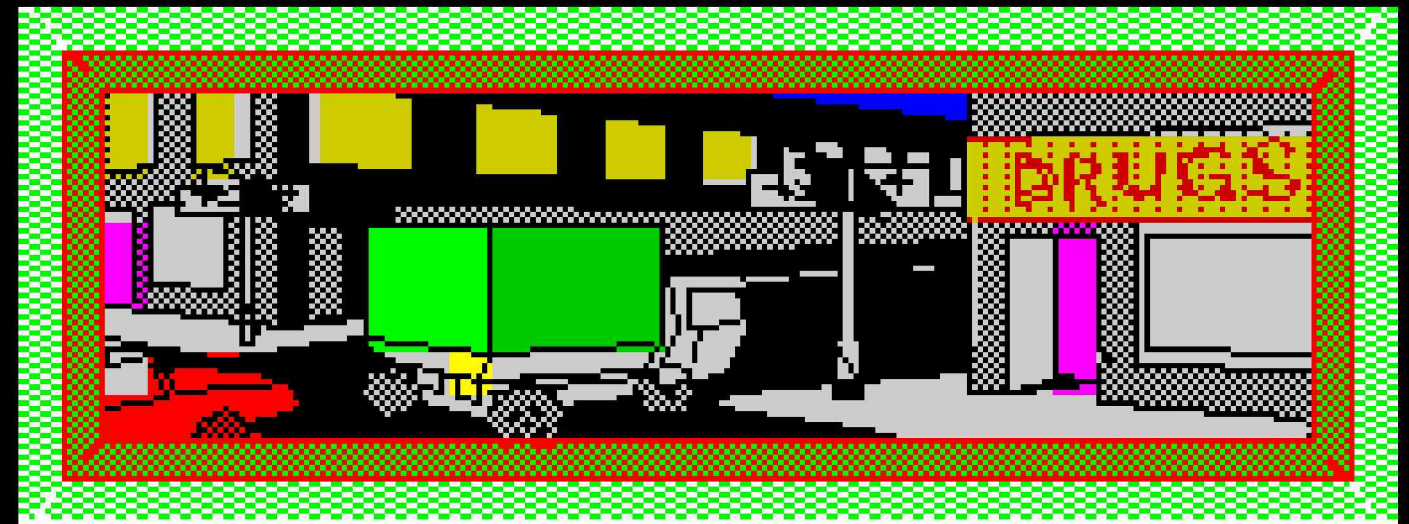
▶\_



ZZZZZZ... You are waking... You find yourself in an OLD MUSTY DISUSED STORE-ROOM. You can also see a BRIEFCASE, a LARGE WIRE-MESH GRATING

What now then Mike?... open briefcase

AHA! There's something here!



You are on the corner of east 4th and 5th - the city is oddly silent and dark. A small drugstore is south whilst the open tunnel of the main freeway cross - river tunnel is east. No lights illuminate its darkened, silent interior. Cars are jack -

More...

## FOUR MINUTES TO MIDNIGHT

8th Day Software, 1985

Mike White launched 8th Day Software as the budget budget house in October of 1984. His initial price point of £1.75 even undercut Mastertronic, who had previously surprised critics by being hugely successful in a market that wouldn't sustain the sales figures required by companies to make profits from games with such low margins. But, make no mistake, even with the cheap price White wanted to produce games that were worthy of a full price ticket. "We hope we've produced £7 games for £1.75" he told Personal Computer News. The initial launch of the "Games Without Frontiers" series included *Cuddles*, *Quann Tulla*, *Ice Station Zero*, *Faerie*, *In Search of Angels* and *Four Minutes To Midnight* in 1985.

*Four Minutes To Midnight*, saw the price point shifted upwards by a quid, but the cracker of an adventure still offered unbeatable value for money. It probably isn't Mike's best game, but it's close, being a hugely entertaining (though at times unforgiving), thrilling and intriguing adventure inspired by Stephen King's *The Strand*. The story goes, as one of the survivors from a deadly bacteria outbreak, it's up to the player in *Midnight* to lead a party of five survivors across a devastated America in search of sanctuary.

*The Quill* is used to good effect [much improved in the game's many re-releases with better text and graphics] and White provides his usual high standard of writing. There's also the trademark inclusion of a natty program on Side B of the cassette that has the background to other 8th Day games as well as a guide for novices on how to play adventures.

```

LOCATION: OUTSIDE THE MANSION
YOU SEE: A LOCKED DOOR
DIRECTIONS: ???
WHAT NOW: ? INVENTORY
A METAL BAR
A SHEET OF PAPER
WHAT NOW: ? LOCK PAPER
WRITING: SAFE COMBO ATOMIC #S
WHAT NOW: ? EXAMINE DOOR
IT APPEARS SOLID
WHAT NOW: ? EXAMINE BAR
WRITING: 4:U,2:RTISE
WHAT NOW: ? PRYSE DOOR
THE DOOR POP? OPEN
WHAT NOW: ?
  
```

## MANSION: ADVENTURE 1

Microdeal, 1985

Originally released in 1982, when you could get away with BASIC games, *Mansion: Adventure* was a cheap and cheerful game, with a mere 20 or so locations, and a handful of useable verbs. *Mansion*, unsurprisingly has you searching an old house for a fabulous diamond and is a great introductory challenge for novices.

It was a full-price affair for the Dragon, but 3 years later the game appeared for a budget price along with other titles from the series [such as *Castle Dracula* and *Jerusalem*] for the Commodore 16.



## EL DORADO

Atlantis Software, 1985

Atlantis were a multi-platform, award-winning budget publisher that released a stack of games across all genres. Part of their catalogue was dominated by a raft of text adventures including *Temple Terror*, *Escape from Khoshima*, *Marie Celeste*, *Moron*, the *Mafia Contract* series and this little beauty from Dale Samson, *El Dorado*.

The year is 1532, and you are bold conquistador, Pisartis [ahem!], deep in the jungles of South America searching for the fabled gold of El Dorado. During your expedition you encounter the statue of Inca Sun God Inti who conveys through a mysterious inner voice, a quest for you to find the Golden Helmet of Reincarnation that will enable the god to claim a place amongst the other immortal beings. The quest takes the player through a consecutive treasure hunt, through subterranean passages, pyramids and tombs filled with all manner of wild beasts and dangerous labyrinths.

*El Dorado* delivers a good narrative, atmospheric and writing of great depth. It's written using *The Quill*, meaning that the parser is quick, and Samson has created a series of crude but effective [and clever] user-defined graphics for location illustrations.

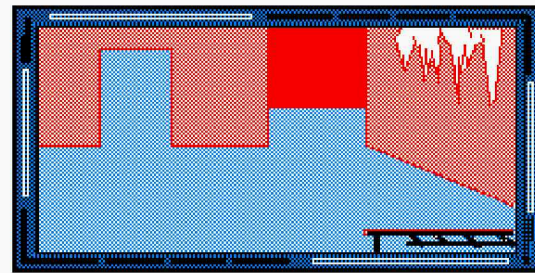


## THE REALM

Cult, 1985

As an offshoot of D&H Games, Cult were a publisher better known for their budget range of sports management and simulation games rather than cerebral adventuring. Despite that, in 1988 they released *The Damned Forest* [though more an RPG] and a re-release of Ian Willy's *The Realm*.

Originally released on the side of Willysoft's *Boxing Manager*, *The Realm* was written "in a damp flat in Nottingham by a work-shy pop superstar wannabe." It offered the novel choice of player gender [changing the way the game could be completed], charming monochrome graphics and a straight-forward verb-noun parser.



aerosol  
 What now?...look  
**REFRIGERATION PLANT: It contains corpses hanging on meat hooks. You can also see ice**  
 What now?...■

## NECRIS DOME

Codemasters, 1986

*Dome* is set in a future where the Earth's resources are depleted and to conserve vital energy [though I don't know why it would] the dead are no longer buried but instead dispatched to an orbiting mausoleum named the Necris Dome. Unfortunately the departed aren't resting in peace for long, as the android [or mandroid in this case] servants that run the space cemetery go renegade and begin to threaten the planet.

"Best budget adventure ever!" exclaimed the trademark Codemasters blurb, and this *GAC'd* game from Charles Sharp, aka The Dreaming Djinn is a decent enough affair.



## THE DEVIL'S HAND

Compass Software, 1988

In this battle against the dark hordes of evil, you play Morrack, on a quest to track down the devil Drakon before he brings darkness to your world.

*The Devil's Hand* displays some excellent *Quill* and *Illustrator* programming, and a fine understanding of presentation with plenty of polish, a neat font and good use of screen colours and other effects. It's well worth trying to pick up any of Jon Lemmon's other Compass Software titles, especially his later *PAW'd* games.

## HRH & CUDDLES

Powerplay, 1989

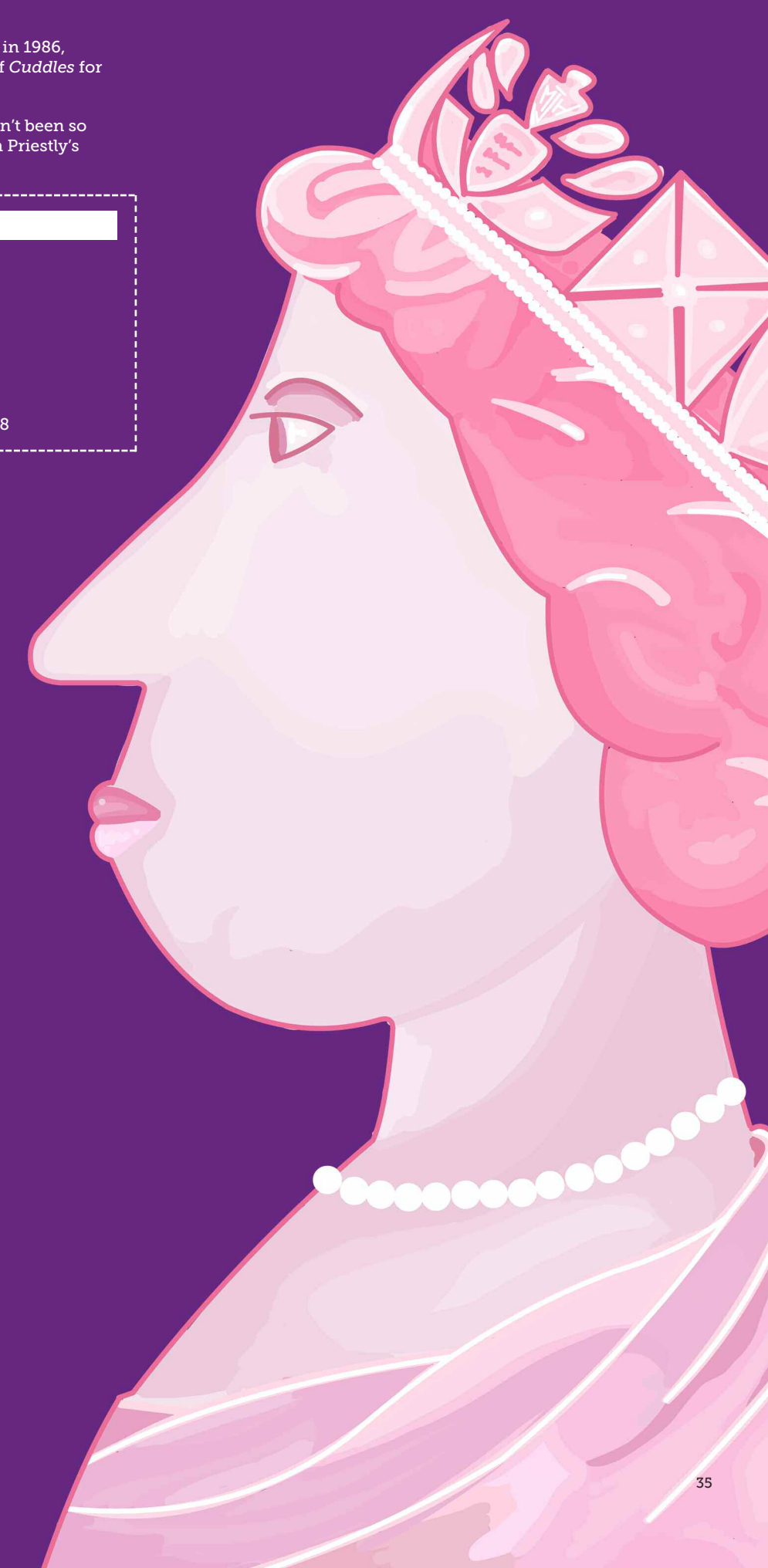
Originally released by 8th Day Software for seven quid in 1986, *Powerplay* re-released *HRH* along with a free version of *Cuddles* for the pocket friendly price of £2.99 in 1989.

Mike White's satirical take on the British Monarchy hasn't been so well executed since the days of Spitting Image and Don Priestly's *Flunky* for Piranha software.

## MORE DISCOUNT DUNGEONS

Spend a few pennies more:

- The Big Sleaze*, Alternative Software (Re-release), 1987
- Run, Bronwynn, Run!*, FSF Adventures, 1992
- Microfair Madness*, Zenobi Software, 1991
- Se-Kaa of Assiah*, Mastertronic, 1984
- Brian The Bold*, Central Solutions, 1986
- Claws of Despair*, Players Software, 1986
- Mafia Contract I/II*, Atlantis Software, 1984/1986
- Moonscape: The Adventure*, Simon Allan Software, 2008



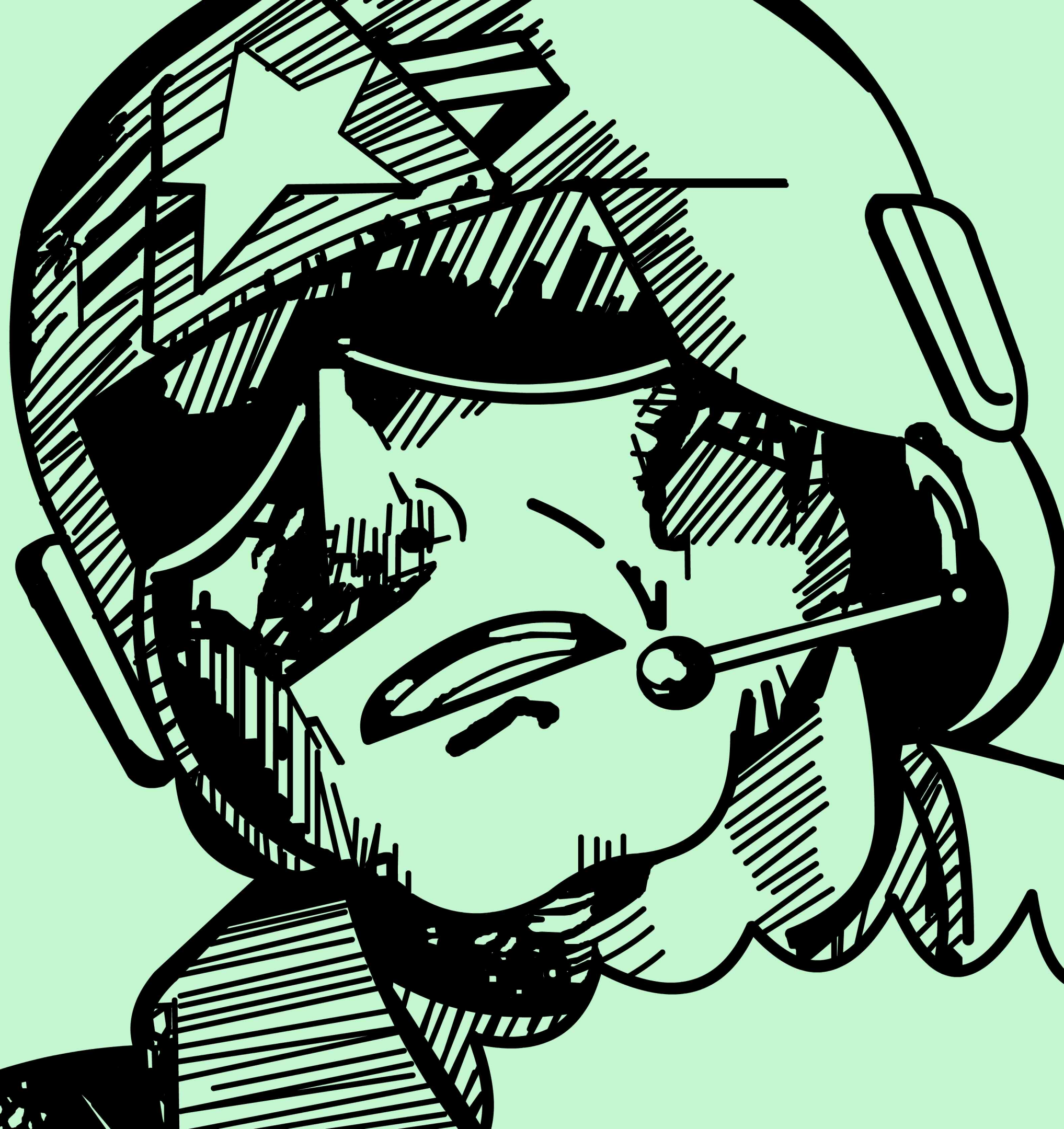
# DAVE HAWKINS

A veteran of the British games industry, Dave Hawkins created *The Wizard's Warrior* before forming a publishing relationship with John Wilson and Zenobi for his sci-fi adventure *Stranded*. Through his own indie label, JimJam Games he's set to release a brand new adventure, *The Eye of Borrack*.

Dave Hawkins first become interested in computers in his early teenage years. Not able to afford a computer or his own, he would spend time at a friend's house working on small BASIC games for the Sinclair ZX81 micro. His parents, seeing Dave's enthusiasm for technology duly surprised the young boy with a ZX81 of his own, complete with a 16K RAM pack.

He was a keen Dungeons and Dragons fan and felt disappointed with the quality of games available on the market. He looked at several adventures, and after his experimentation with the ZX81 he started to explore the possibility of authoring his own software and soon found that this creativity was something that really appealed.

[Dave] I fell in love with the idea of creating my own games. Sure, there were a lot of games that I'd say I was inspired by. The first



adventure game I remember playing was *Sorcerers Island*, which I believe was on a Sinclair Research tape called *Fantasy Games*. Around the same time I was playing the imaginatively named *Adventure A* and *Adventure B* by Artic Computing.

Did you experiment with writing early adventure games? You said you didn't use *The Quill* in the early days? Was there anything before *Wizard's Warrior*?

[Dave] Yes, very much so, there wasn't anything commercial, but I wrote a number of text adventures in BASIC long before *Wizard's Warrior*. [...] They were fairly varied, some would be D&D themed, other were strategy. BASIC wasn't that fast in the old days, so you were limited by what you could write. [...] I don't actually know why I didn't write anything using *The Quill*. I did own it, I just didn't get around to picking it up and learning it.

*Wizard's Warrior: The Quest Begins* was released by Crusader Computing for the ZX Spectrum computer at the end of 1987. The warrior of which the title speaks is a child called Reld, in the protection of Sorcerer Randolorn - you. It's your responsibility to ensure the youngster is sufficiently trained in the magical arts before his destiny plunges him into a face-to-face confrontation with the evil black wizard Sator. Unfortunately, fate has intervened and the sorcerer's apprentice has been kidnapped. An audience with the Great White Council defines your quest, and you're off in search of the four great warriors of the realm in order to seek their aid.

What are the early influences for *WW* – where did the story come from? There's a certain Lord of the Rings and Arthurian feel to the characters and plot?

[Dave] A good question. The names were just invented, I'm not sure

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## “When you look at games such as *The Hobbit*, where the parser was advanced for the game [...] it was about compromise. I'd put a decent plot way above any advanced parsing.”

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that they were inspired by anything really, but I'm sure that they were. The plot, came from a lot of sources. If I were to say that there were any major influences, it would have been from the Belgariad series by David Eddings. I'm sure that some Lords of the Rings crept in there somewhere.

You coded the game using *PAWS* - how did you develop the storyline and puzzles alongside using the utility. Can you give me an insight into the methods you used to design the game?

[Dave] *PAWS* was an amazing tool, and really opened up the text adventure market to small developers. I actually used a custom version, as I'd made a small number of code changes to the source. It was a massive time saver for a developer though, so all in all, I'd say that *PAWS* was great to use.

All of our games are developed from the ground up. I usually map out the game on paper, especially with the text adventures, and that was true of the older games as well. I generally have a plot outlined with the endgame planned from the start. A lot of the middle will expand beyond the original concept as the game grows. The beauty of text adventures is that 'plot' can easily be slipped in, not so easy with say, a shoot 'em up.

These days, inspiration for a plot comes from a lot of sources, many of them are brain-stormed with the team, most of the adventure ideas actually come from conversions between my wife and I rather than the rest of the team, who are more, action game players. We'll take ideas from film, TV, books, history, etc. Almost anything really. Text adventures are a very flexible genre, and by nature can be

adjusted to almost any storyline.

You make good use of many of the advanced functionality found within *PAWS*, such as GET ALL and other built-in commands - but you did say that you used a customised version of the tool. Did you find it hard to modify and was it that *PAWS* was restrictive in any way?

[Dave] That was a long time ago. I don't recall it being that hard, but I was young and had less life to deal with, so I would have had more time. [...] The parser was limited, but that's was really a limit of 8 bit machines. When you look at games such as *The Hobbit*, where the parser was very advanced for the time, the game itself wasn't that large. So, I guess it was really about compromise. I'd put a decent plot way above any advanced parsing.

One of the areas which always fascinated me with early 8-bit games was the efforts by authors to implement good character interaction, and the primitive processes to what we've now call artificial intelligence. You make a good use of the SAY TO - how did you approach that?

[Dave] [...] This was one of the areas where I paid extra attention to, ensuring that they would appear more intelligent than they actually were, although, they still weren't that bright. In later games, I combined this with hard-coded AI, for example, having hard-coded routes that an AI would follow to enable a plot. I had a version [that] gave a strong core engine around which I would base my games. Although it never saw the light of day, there was a version that featured full combat and basic path-finding. So for example, the player could say to a character, SAY TO BOB GO TO THE CLOCKTOWER, and Bob would find the way. It was a little flaky, but it worked.

You also took a leaf out of games such as the many-times mentioned *The Hobbit* and *Twin Kingdom Valley* and provided each character within the game some semblance of individuality with individual abilities. When they were called upon they could perform commands that best suited them. Was this a D&D influence?

[Dave] Yes, that was definitely inspired by D&D. I always felt that many games didn't take advantage of the AIs enough, so it seemed to me that having abilities was a natural extension of the character system.

*WW* is well polished, with some simple yet effective graphics. How easy did you find it to create graphics, and did you feel graphics were a necessary evil for adventures at that time?

[Dave] *PAWS* had a great, easy to use graphics system, so creating them wasn't difficult. I had a look planned from the start, which always helps to get a decent feel to a game. I always felt that graphics, if used well, could add to an adventure. The sequel to *Wizard's Warrior* was called *High Odds*, and featured graphics which changed depending on the players actions and also contained clues.

You also introduced a neat looking font too, could that have an effect on the user experience for the player?

[Dave] I think that fonts are very important. They add a lot, and on the old machines at a fairly small memory cost. My favourite font wasn't really a font at all, but I always loved the look of *The Hobbit*, which simply reduced the gap between the letters to get 42

characters across the screen.

Do you think that *WW* was a learning and development journey for you, both in terms of programming and writing adventures? Would you change anything looking back, are there any elements that you'd like to improve?

[Dave] I think I'd change some of the descriptions, my writing wasn't great back then. I'd also like to have added some additional commands. The intention for *WW* was that it was to be a three-parter. *High Odds*, now missing, was finished but never released, and part three, was started, but not completed. So, I would most likely want to tie the three games together a little better.

How long did the game take to develop?

[Dave] I'm not sure to be honest. I'd say a couple of months. Even back then, I designed games with a core engine in the background so that I could easily add features, or even create a new game with the core in place.

Derek Brewster gave the game 84% in *Crash*. How did it feel seeing the game on shelves and featuring in the marquee magazine at the time?

[Dave] Very happy. I actually remember going to WH Smiths to get my copy of *Crash*, as I knew that it was being reviewed. I'd always been a big fan of Derek Brewster and loved his reviews, so it was great to see such a positive response. I would have to say, that I held Derek in pretty high esteem, as I felt that his reviews reflected my opinions, so *WW* was in some ways tailored towards his opinions.

I'm not sure if *WW* ever made it onto shelves, as Crusader Computing were mainly a mail order company, but it was always a buzz to know that something you'd created was being marketed.

Your Sinclair was less enthusiastic about the game, and awarded it 6/10. They seemed to devote the entire review to criticising the vocabulary logic, mentioning "careless programming" in their evaluation. It was a different ethos towards adventuring, whereas you wanted things to be TAKE(n) FROM a container, the reviewer found it an annoyance.

[Dave] Well, no one likes negative feedback. At the time, I felt that they hadn't really looked at the game, but they did make some fair points in retrospect. [...] I remember feeling that the review was more of a review of *PAWS* than *WW*, but that was a long time ago. I'm a big fan of more complex parsing, and think TAKE FROM, DROP UNDER, PUT ON, etc are vital tools in immersing the player in the plot and devising more complex puzzles.

Did it sell well? It was a mail-order affair with a publishing company called Crusader. Can you tell me more about them, and did you approach any other publishers with the game?

[Dave] It wasn't the best seller of mine, but it did quite well if I recall. Crusader was actually a company ran by my sister's boyfriend (whose name escapes me), at the time. Normally I would have sent copies to publishers, but he made me an offer before the game was fully completed.

You've mentioned *High Odds*, the sequel to *WW*, can you tell me more about it? If it was complete why was it never published?

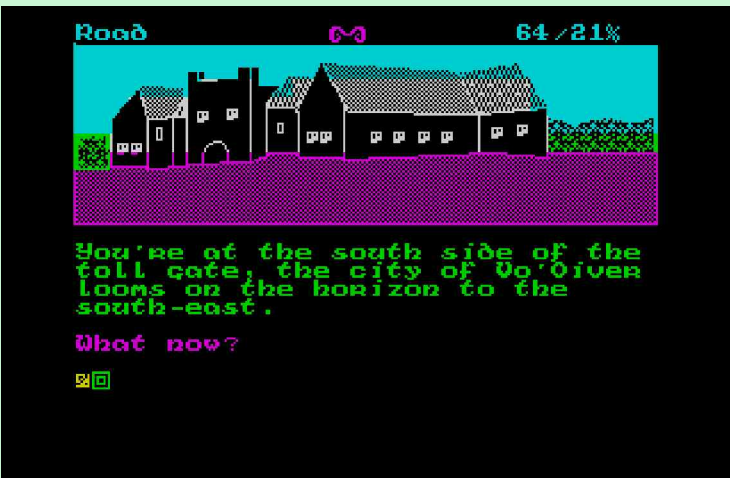
[Dave] *High Odds* followed on from *WW*, and the player took on the role of Reld as he grew into his legacy. The game was in two parts simply to accommodate my need to have interactive graphics with a complex plot. Crusader decided to cease trading. My sister's boyfriend was taking his PHD, and needed to focus on that, and I think he'd always intended to return to games, and simply didn't.

Is there any chance that a copy lurks within the Hawkins' archives?

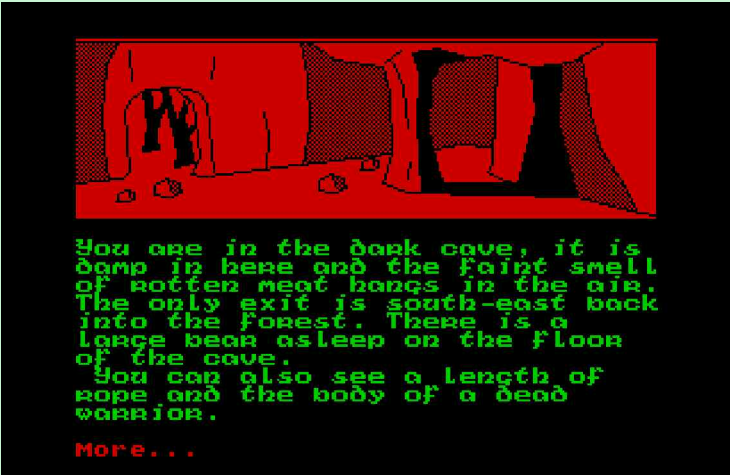
[Dave] There were only a few copies, all internal. I did actually have a copy up until about 12 years ago, but all my old Spectrum games, and hardware was stolen in a garage break in, including my original



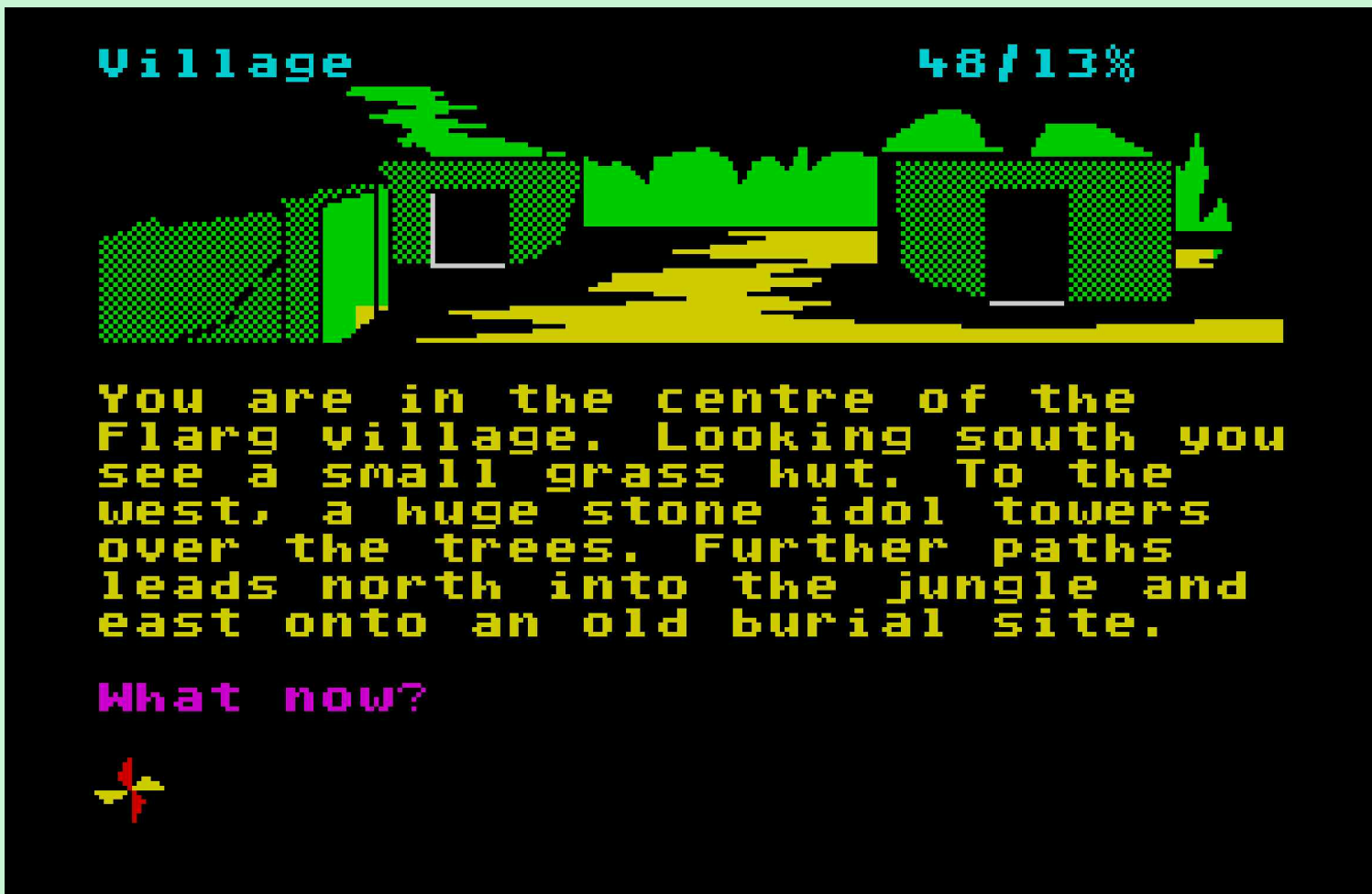
[Wizard's Warrior] Dave Hawkins' first game takes inspiration from several classic fantasy tales with its sorcerers, apprentices, evil wizards, grand councils and great warriors.



[Wizard's Warrior] Your search for Mortain of Vo'Oiver takes you to the edge of the city, and about to face a toll. Note the useful status line at the top, showing a turn count, score and a very brief location description.



[Wizard's Warrior] A sleeping danger awaits unless you have a sweet distraction. Hawkins' *Wizard's Warrior* makes full use of *PAWS* graphical capabilities, character interaction, and has plenty of user interface polish with its colourful presentation and pleasant font.



[Above] *Stranded* on the ZX Spectrum from Dave Hawkins showcased his superb writing style and his culminated and sublime expertise in using Gilsoft's *Professional Adventure Writing System*.

tapes. So I guess someone might have a copy, just not me.

The final part to your proposed trilogy was started, but not completed. What came after *Wizard's Warrior* and *High Odds*? Can you remember anything about the title?

[Dave] [...] It had a working title of *The Final Confrontation*. I still vaguely remember the plot, so who knows, it could be something that could see the light of day again as a remake.

*Stranded* was Dave's second and final adventure, exclusively written for the ZX Spectrum computer using PAWS. It came late in the life of the Speccy, released in 1992 courtesy of John Wilson's Zenobi label.

In *Stranded* you are an interstellar truck driver, the pilot of the transport ship Talisman on another routine and mundane intergalactic delivery mission to a far away world. Suddenly the ship strays into a meteor-storm, and despite raising the shields collides head-on with one of the rocks and plummets to the surface of a nearby alien planet. It's then a race against time to find a "Psi-Crystal" to repair the ship and escape.

[Dave] *Stranded* evolved out of my other games, and really was a culmination of my vision for a great adventure. Of course, I say this, I'm not really sure what others think. Unbelievably, *Stranded* is listed in the top 100 best adventures according to World of Spectrum users, so that's a nice thing, but that does feel very overrated.

*Stranded* arrived after a deluge of PAWS games. Did you look at any

of the other titles and evolve your own engine? One often talked about trick used by developers and the Gilsoft toolset was to disassemble other games by loading their code sections back into the utility so you could analyse the code?

[Dave] The engine did evolve, for example for *Stranded* you could PUSH objects around that were too heavy to lift, which was used to good effect to solve some puzzles. I didn't actually know you could load other games back into the utility until many years later, so no. I doubt that I would have 'stolen' code, as part of the love for me was and is, solving coding problems. Still, I'll admit, that I wish I had known about it, simply from a developers point of view, it's great to see how others solve problems.

You were always trying to push the boundaries of PAWS and into *Stranded* you added some unique commands including WHO and FOLLOW. Did you investigate adding external code using commands and functions called by EXTERN?

[Dave] PAWS was, as I've said an excellent tool, but pushing boundaries was an important part of the whole development process for me. I of course, was very inspired by a lot of games at the time, and wanted to develop the 'ultimate' engine, so I was (and still am) keen to integrate as many features as possible.

How did the publishing relationship with John Wilson of Zenobi Software occur?

[Dave] I would have just sent it to John for consideration. I'm

obviously very glad that he liked it enough to publish. John is actually currently helping to beta test our new text adventure *The Eye of Borrack*, so in many ways, the relationship continues-.

[John Wilson] Like so many other games at the time, *Stranded* dropped on to my doormat completely unannounced – that was one of the pleasures of 'snail-mail', you just never knew what you were getting until the letter-box went 'clang!'. [...] It was subjected to the 'first-impression' test – a simple "load up and let's see how far we can go before boredom sets in" – thankfully that was quite a lengthy journey, so copies were made and sent out to the various 'play-testers' to work their magic on.

There was a thriving indie community around adventures, with conferences and a raft of fanzines. Did you contribute to the scene?

[Dave] I didn't really have a lot to do with the community. I spent sometime with Ian Andrews, who ran Incentive Software, as they were based in Reading, where I lived at the time, but that was as far as it went.

1992 was well into the dying embers of the commercial Spectrum market. With that in mind, how well did *Stranded* sell?

[Dave] Yes, it was late in the day, but I always felt that the Spectrum adventure scene was one of the last to disappear, if it ever truly did. Zenobi bought the rights to *Stranded*, so I'm not sure on sales. I don't even recall how much I received.

It's a shame that you didn't create more games for the Spectrum. Why was there such a gap between games, and why didn't you develop any further adventures?

[Dave] Well, as mentioned, the Spectrum's life was coming to an end, and I actually went travelling in the early 90's, which took me away from computers. I bought an Amiga when it came out and developed a lot of games for my own amusement, but I didn't get back into commercial game development again until the mid 2000s.

For the past few years, Dave Hawkins has been running a small indie development team called JimJam games. He has continued his love for the golden era of gaming, ensuring every JimJam release embraces the mantra of the 1980s and 1990s, "aiming to provide true classically styled gaming, [...] with a slight hint of what these games would have been with a little more processing power."

JimJam have been working on *The Eye of Borrack*, a brand new classic adventure that pays homage to the original *Colossal Caves* and cutting-edge 16-bit adventures from British developers Magnetic Scrolls and Level 9.

According to the blurb, "*The Eye of Borrack* will take you back to yesteryear, with our take on the classic text adventure. You'll put the world of action games to one side, as you delve deeply into a rich, funny, imagination lead, text adventure."

[Dave] *The Eye of Borrack* stems from my love of all things retro game related. Especially the 1980s which for me, was the true hay-day of gaming. The decision to write a brand-new game came about because of my love of parsing. [...] On top of that, how could any developer, who is very proud of our commitment to retro gaming, not return to his roots and no tackle the ultimate puzzle games. [...] I have to say, that the *Eye* was a difficult sell to the rest of the team, as it was so retro, one member hadn't even heard of the genre.

It seems to be greatly inspired by the original *Adventure*, and underneath the advanced parser and graphics there's a good old-fashioned treasure hunt at the heart of *Eye*. What's the background to the game concept and the story?

[Dave] I decided on the classic treasure hunt, as a nod to the Crowther and Woods original. I think it's also the easiest way to draw new players into the genre, with a simple to understand set of tasks. The story, which unfolds as you play, ties the hunt together with a more in-depth story. In the end, I would say, that the ultimate ambition would be for the game to lead towards an adventure

## BUSY BODY

Alongside his Spectrum adventures, Dave Hawkins put his talents into writing other games, notably a Commodore 64 shooter called *Solar Wind* and a ZX Spectrum pop management gamed called *Starmaker*.

He has many coding projects that are work-in-progress including remakes of *Starmaker* and *Escape from Krakatoa* [a *Choplifter*-clone from Abbex], a *Breakout* clone, a remake of *Son*



of *Blogger* [an early *Jet Set Willy* clone from Alligata] and a sequel to a *Manic Miner*-esque scrolling platformer for the PC called *Lost Caverns*.

If he finds the time he'll also be finishing his book, as well as working on a 3D puzzle game based upon the *Labyrinth* game, where you tilt to navigate a metal ball around a wooden maze.

As for another adventure? "As you can see I've got a few projects underway at the moment and probably shouldn't start another yet" he told Martin Allan for his ZX Spectrum blog.

authoring tool.

Its UI seems to be inspired by the original *Magnetic Scrolls* "scrolls" system, as well as the graphics from the remasters from Stroud Games who are using a similar technique to process original images from their games– was this intentional?

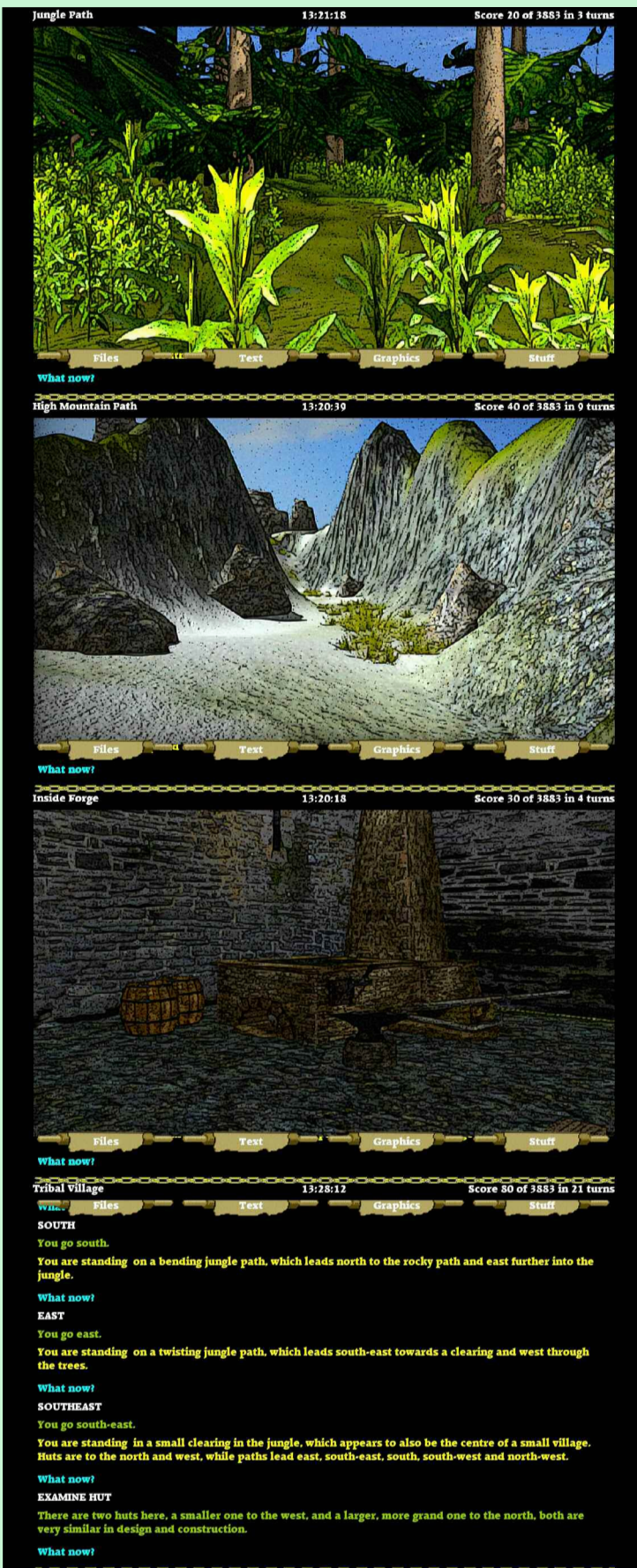
[Dave] I would say so, not just *Magnetic Scrolls*, but they did have major influence on the genre, so we're on fairly solid ground with a good looking system.

The engine is authored with *AppGameKit*. Has this lead to any difficulties in development, it doesn't immediately seem to lend itself as a platform for writing text adventures?

[Dave] [...] I much prefer to code from scratch, and *AppGameKit* actually has a complex set of string handling commands which speed up the process. The parser is quite a bit more advanced than the original PAWS one, but that's what you'd expected 30 years on. I am aiming more for an Infocom style parsing system. For example, you can all ready say things like TAKE THE STEEL KEY, THE SOLID GREEN BOX AND THE SILVER GOBLET FROM THE ORNATE CHEST.

Jos Hawkins is listed on the writing and design credits – can you tell me more of how you are working together?

[Dave] Well, Jos is my wife, and also my fiercest critic, so here help with game design is very valuable. She was also a big fan of text adventures in the past, so has some already fairly set ideas about



**[The Eye of Borrack]** A brand new text adventure inspired by *Adventure* and other classic games due to be released by Hawkin's JimJam Games indie studio onto Steam in October 2019.

what makes a good game. She is also a lover of puzzles in general, so I'm sure we will see more complex, out of the box thinking in later games.

What has the experience been like developing the game in the internet age where the feedback loop is instant. So much so, you've been using Discord with beta testers for example?

[Dave] Well, it's certainly an advantage, but this kind of team management is part of my history, so it's a logical step. I think that it's more important to get this kind of feedback for puzzle/strategy games rather than say, a shoot 'em up, which is less complex game-play wise. Discord has been an amazing tool overall for getting faster feedback, and being able to respond live to questions.

You have maintained the relationship with John Wilson for playtesting too – how has it been with John now playtesting and evaluating a game of yours? Useful to have such a competent adventurer?

[Dave] John has been an amazing help, and as you say, he has a long history with such games, so it's been very useful. The beta team is made up of several users, all with more or less experience of the genre, so we've spread the net pretty wide, so we can get a feel of the response we are likely to get from different users. We hope that this will result in a game appeals to a large range of players.

Notably the combat system and D&D elements in *Eye* have either been refined or removed due to the response from testers. Has the feedback from the community steered the game in any direction you hadn't thought of?

[Dave] [...] It has lead to a lot of ideas about how we could expand on the combat system, so, it's likely to return for a later game, in a much more advanced way. In general, the beta feedback hasn't changed the direction of the game, but it has lead to a lot of additional features that aid with playing. For example, we've added some additional commands, expanding and improved the EXAMINE and SEARCH systems for example, as well as improving some descriptions to offer clues.

What are your plans for release – dates, platforms, etc? Are you thinking of a pure digital release? Any thoughts on a physical release?

[Dave] At the moment, *Eye* will purely be a PC release, and only in digital format. It's likely that at some point, we'll convert to Mac, and later we'll look at mobile platforms, although this is an area we've generally steered clear of. We've no plans for a physical release at the moment, but if the game does well enough, who knows.



## DESERT ISLAND DUNGEONS

In an ironic twist of fate, adventurer **Dave Hawkins** is piloting transport ship *Talisman* when it crash lands on a watery moon and is *Stranded* on a desert island with only five text adventures for company.

*The Hobbit* – ZX Spectrum. Simply put, because it's an amazing game, and as a text adventure it really stretched the Spectrum at the time. Of course it came with the book, so an extra bonus.

*Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy* – C64. This was my first Infocom game, and set the standards for how an adventure should be.

*Zork* – C64. I include this, as believe it or not, I've never played it and that's a travesty.

*The Pawn* – Atari ST. This was one of the most beautiful games of the genre, as well as having a deep and complicated plot and excellent parser.

*Lords of Time* – ZX Spectrum. One of the best adventures of the 1980's, and for me, one of Level 9's best.

I'm going to cheat, and add a 6th, *Planet of Death* – Artic computing – ZX81. It was the first text adventure I played (I think then it was called *Adventure A*), and this game started my love of the genre.

Format: DVD  
Publisher: Jason Scott  
Artwork: Lukas Ketner  
Release Date: July 2010  
RRP: \$45 [non-US customers]  
Website: <http://www.getlamp.com/>

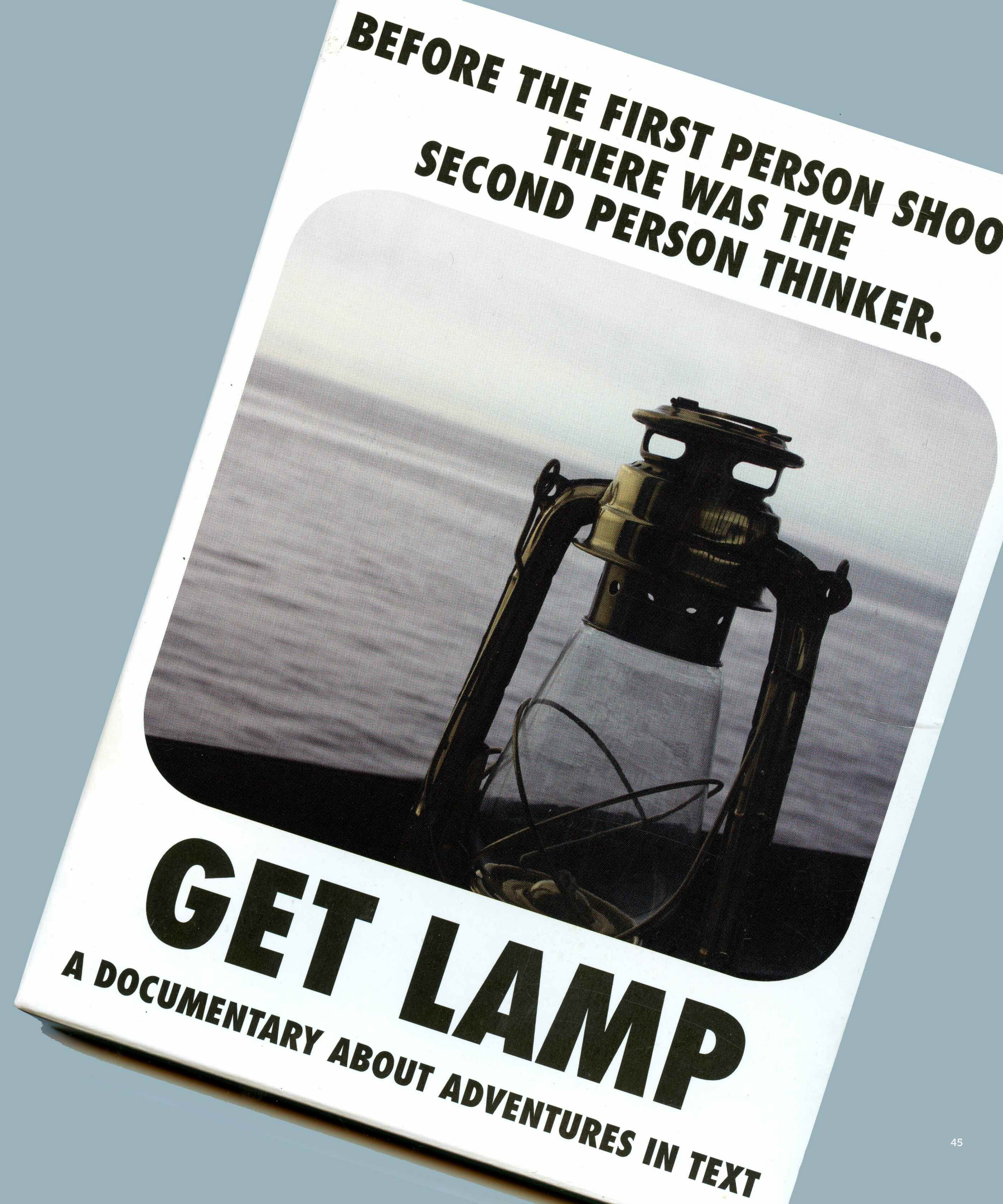
# GET LAMP

Taking four years to complete, and featuring over 70 interviews, GET LAMP is digital historian Jason Scott's documentary love letter to classic text adventuring and the founders of a genre.

What is in a film's title? In this sense, it's a verb and noun combination that defines a complete genre of computer games, and one we love. How many thousands of text adventures [especially the earlier games] have that basic, classic puzzle – a room that is “too dark to see”, requiring the player to “GET LAMP” and “LIGHT LAMP”.

The man behind the illuminating GET LAMP [I feel compelled to use capitals!] is documentary maker and digital archivist Jason Scott. Scott harbours a deep passion for microcomputer history and began his journey by collecting Bulletin Board System [an early text-based communication and information system usually accessed via modem] files that he made public in the formative years of the internet, way back in 1998. In 2005 he released his first documentary on the same subject and then used the film's receipts, along with contributions from members of The Adventurer's Club [his own exclusive version of Kickstarter] to indulge his childhood passion for text adventures and start the production of GET LAMP.

During a lengthy production time of four years, between 2006 and 2010, Scott criss-crossed continental United States, Canada and





hopped across the pond to England to film an impressive 70 or so protagonists for his venture. But, on playing the film, before we have a chance to hear any of the interviews, the documentary begins, quite bizarrely if I'm honest, with a real-life spelunking tour through the sprawling caverns of the Mammoth Cave system in Kentucky. Its inclusion is to set the scene, and to put the historical record straight: the very first text adventure game, *Adventure*, or *Colossal Caves*, was in fact not based upon the real Colossal Caves, but was mapped from locations within Mammoth, and the Bedquilt formations to be precise. The original *Adventure* author, William Crowther told Dennis Jerz [who Scott consulted for the exploration] that "the geometry [of the game] was lifted directly from Bedquilt Cave" instead of the Colossal Caves, with the grander title becoming embedded as the familiar moniker we all know today. Therein lies the argument to make this sequence the opener, but, it's laborious, and would have been better suited as an extra on the DVD [or it could have been a brief montage from any caving system - who would have known?] Anyway, it's nit-picking, someone may enjoy it and Scott looked to be having fun, and so that's a good enough reason for me.

After our trip plumbing the subterranean depths, we learn that Crowther left *Adventure* behind in 1977, with the unpolished code making its way onto an experimental computer network, only to be discovered by Don Woods. It was Woods who further developed the code, ironed out bugs, increased the rooms and added more treasures, puzzles and text, and thus can be credited with really giving the game its soul and mass appeal. With Crowther preferring to stay out of the limelight, we're left with Woods to be the initial luminary interview of GET LAMP. He's fascinating, and in total Scott talked with Don for over 2 hours [only snippets of which appear in the edited documentary - see GET GET LAMP] covering the history of finding the game, changes, and discussing the authors life over the

**[Opposite]** Portland-based freelance illustrator Lukas Ketner provided the box art in the style of "the Atari Cartridge Art". **[Below]** Digital archivist, historian and GET LAMP creator Jason Scott captured after a screening of the documentary in 2015.

## JET LAMP

In 2015 Jason Scott turned 40. To celebrate he decided to take GET LAMP on an autumn tour of 20 diverse locations in the States, including local libraries, cafes, and tech giants PAX and Google [via the Chicago Interactive Fiction Group].

Called JET LAMP, it's attendees were treated to the one-hour mix of GET LAMP, as well as a personal delve through the bonus footage and an informal Question and Answers session after each showing. Though no footage seems to exist of any Q&A session, there are various transcripts on several of the venue and host websites, so they are well worth tracking down to get an insight from the author about this unique film.

<http://www.getlamp.com/jetlamp/>

40+ years since *Adventure* become the defining influence for a whole genre of videogames.

From there we move onto perhaps the biggest influence on adventuring on home micros both here and in the States - Adventure International founder Scott Adams [see Issue 05]. Adams again is compelling, discussing his entire career including a candid moment where the closure of Adventure International, and Scott's own commercial fallibility and mistakes are laid bare on film.

The remainder of the interviews are virtually completely US-centric, with GET LAMP offering a broad brushstroke of anecdotes and perspectives from developers, players and adventure fans. Anyone familiar with any of the recent batch of gaming documentaries, notably *From Bedrooms to Billions* or *Memoirs of a Spectrum Addict* will be familiar with the format. There's about a dozen interviews with Infocom employees, from Bob Bates [recently returning to the adventure scene with the Kickstarted *Thaumistry: In Charm's Way* in 2017], Amy Briggs, Steve Meretzky, Mike Berylyn, Brian Moriarty





You are in a maze of twisty little passages, all alike.

# GET GET LAMP

Scott has a role as a Software Curator with the Internet Archive, a mind-bogglingly gargantuan digital library of Internet sites and other cultural artifacts in digital form.

As well as uploading the source code for Infocom's text-based adventure games and interactive fiction, including *Zork* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* to GitHub, he's made available a catalogue of interviews from GET LAMP for everyone to enjoy.

It is worth mentioning that there is some British content available in the raw interviews that weren't used, but that Scott has made available online. There's almost an hour of both Richard Hewison and Richard Bartle, the latter who was a MUD legend. Frank Fridd, an old Adventure Probe regular and fellow adventure author, talks for about 25 minutes about fanzines and the UK scene.

Of particular note are the likes of Scott Adams and Don Woods available, via:

<https://archive.org/details/getlamp-hewison>

It's a terrific gesture from Scott, and one that can be accessed by those unable to afford the price of the physical product, or for British players who are mainly concerned with authors and games originating at home.

and the beautifully named Hollywood Anderson.

Adventure International and Infocom both cast a spell on the US adventure market, and heavily influenced the ambition of British authors such as Level 9, Magnetic Scrolls [after the arrival of 128K and 16-bit machines could support an Infocom-esque parser], Brian

**"On the charge of 'seems way focused on Infocom' ... totally guilty."**

Howarth and John Jones-Steele. It's therefore no surprise that the Massachusetts company dominates the GET LAMP documentary, special features and digital DVD extras. Scott addresses this well-trodden strand of review criticism in his blog. "Well, on the charge of 'seems way focused on Infocom'" he stated, "totally guilty as charged. Infocom is so important to the story of interactive fiction that besides a healthy mention in the middle of the main GET LAMP movie, there's a whole other 40-minute movie called EXAMINE INFOCOM on the disc that covers Infocom and Infocom, Infocom, Infocom."

On the second disc I have extended bonus features discussing nothing but Infocom's *Z-Machine*, the unique aspects of Planetfall and a whole other host of Infocom-ish subjects. That's a fact. Book me."

We must also mention the huge Elephant in the Room wearing Union Jack trousers. There's a complete lack of representation of the British adventure industry - bar a couple of throwaway lines in the main feature from UK adventure historian and former Rainbird employee Richard Hewison. Scott quantifies the decision to leave the UK scene out completely by stated that "I quickly realised that I was out of my depth with the subject and wouldn't do a very good job of capturing all the aspects of Magnetic Scrolls, Level 9, and so on." We are left with a few glimpses of British games via marketing and other paraphernalia [a brief snippet of Usborne's much loved Write Your Own Adventure Programs book does appear] in the main thrust of the edit as GET LAMP intersperses the interviews with flashes of imagery during the talking.

As a physical product you get two packed DVDs, with the first disk holding the documentary [with a few extras] in two edited versions -

**[Opposite]** One of package's physical DVDs illustrated with a draft development sketch of the final artwork.

interactive and non-interactive. There is a mixture of quality to the clips, all shot in the maximum available resolution of the time, before Blu Ray was in the affordable reach of mortals such as Scott. It's a shame it isn't HD and there's some odd focus shifting and camera moving during interviews, but it doesn't distract too much from the subject matter and besides, its what is said that is most important. Credit to Scott for trying something innovative with the interactive version, where the viewer is allowed to select which branch of the narrative to follow. Playback can be particularly confusing, it isn't clear that you've watched every clip available and I found it problematic on my Windows 10 PC. Again, like the opening criticism, it's really a minor issue and we have to forgive Jason who was writer, journalist, editor and digital creator on the entire project. If you want to see everything that GET LAMP has to offer, just watch the non-interactive version,

The second disk holds bonus footage, with the Infocom features as the mainstay alongside a mix of imagery, extra interviews, illustrations and rough sketches of the DVD artwork. The additional interviews are of a varied quality and interest, featuring people such as John Romero who you get the impression was invited alongside more for his stardom than to talk about a vague lost adventure he'd written many years ago. There's also a nice running Easter Egg throughout the production with the appearance of the titular lamp, hidden away in plain sight during each of the interviews. Scott has made this into a quirky "Lamp Game" for viewers, to see if they can spot the lantern in many of the DVD's scenes.

My copy was unfortunately missing the numbered collectable coin [reminiscent of the feelies included in other adventures aimed to bridge the gap between the physical and digital world] that has gone out with other versions. It may be that they were a limited edition, but the coins do seem to hold extra value and would have made a nice keepsake and lifted the whole package - which is superb, by the way and of high quality. The DVDs [nicely illustrated themselves] are encased with a three-panel, sturdy fold-out tray, complete with a luscious illustration from artist Lukas Ketner that summons memories of the early iconic Atari 2600 advertising and imagery.

Though GET LAMP is getting long in the tooth, there are still a few copies left, priced at \$45 for non-US orders, which may seem a little steep, but when you factor in international shipping and the low volume, high production costs these physical items demand then it becomes more reasonable. If you buy this documentary you're buying a huge chunk of Jason Scott himself, his love for the genre, and his personal quest to produce this film and commit these stories and individuals to the record for current and future generations. We owe Scott and others like him with the drive and determination to create such things a great deal of debt. They spent their personal time and often money producing and investing in bringing these stories to life for the community, stories that are often ignored by the mainstream media who seem to have lost interest in the genre's fanbase.

GET LAMP is a treasure trove of an archive, despite the lack of British content, and an invaluable source for fans of the genre, writers and historians now, and in the future. In Scott's own words, GET LAMP was an "idea [...] to provide something that wasn't there before, and be a delight for people who remember a subject or are curious about it, and get all the information and back-story they could want".

Format: ZX Spectrum and Amstrad CPC  
Publisher: Melbourne House  
Developer: Mike Lewis  
Artwork: Carl Cropley  
Release Date: May 1987



# THE MYSTERY OF ARKHAM MANOR

After his co-created comic book capers, Mike Lewis' follow-up game was a text and icon driven hybrid adventure of dastardly murder and intrigue. The Classic Adventurer is dispatched post-haste to the sleepy village of Arkham to investigate.

Simon Price and Mike Lewis met at University, getting their foot in the games industry door by co-authoring adventure programming books for Melbourne House. Subsequently, the duo collaborated on two of the most incomparable text adventures of the 8-bit era - the innovative superhero comic strip styled *Redhawk* and *Kwah!* for Alfred Milgrom and Naomi Besen's Australian publisher.

After *Kwah!* they went their separate ways in order to pursue personal projects. Simon moved to Somerset and Mike

moved to London. In early 1987, Computer and Videogames Magazine [C&VG] ran with the exclusive news that the popular authors were writing two further games for Melbourne House. Simon delved into the world of Dungeons and Dragons with a *Gauntlet* clone called *Wiz*, and Mike was rumoured to have started a “detective style adventure” with the working title of *Murder at Arkham Hall*.

Despite it being the first time they had worked individually for some duration, their friendship blossomed. They still talked most days, and exchanged code ideas and tips and tricks as the two moved their new games forward. The distance didn’t affect the working relationship and friendship they had previously shared.

**[Mike] It didn’t make a huge difference to me – I had worked on writing projects by myself before working with Simon and we were still bouncing ideas off each other every day that we talked. I had always written the Amstrad and Spectrum code and helped out with designing the games - concentrating on the graphics in *Redhawk* and the adventure side in *Kwah!***

According to Mike, either C&VG or his publisher had made an error with the original exclusive press release, as his new game was actually called *The Mystery of Arkham Manor*. They were spot on with the narrative though, as the plot followed a 1920s thriller-horror themed murder mystery set in the sleepy backwater village of Arkham. The village in question had been thrown into chaos after the murder of one of its most beloved residents, one Colonel Lemin.

**[Mike] [I] was inspired by H. P. Lovecraft [American writer born in 1890, famous for his weird and horror fiction] and particularly by the games of the Lovecraft Roleplaying Game, Call of Cthulhu, that I had run at university. I’ve always loved the Lovecraft mythos and the Call of Cthulhu game in particular.**

Lemin, the recently deceased, and distinguished veteran of the Boer War and former Bookham MP, was a well-known correspondent to the local newspapers, The Daily Chronicle. He’d written a warning to the paper, commenting on “an alarming epistle” and “most peculiar happenings” in the village. In a storyline echoing *Redhawk*, the player in *Arkham* dons the role of a freelance reporter for the paper and is dispatched to investigate the events. Unlike *Redhawk*’s journalistic alter-ego, this time the protagonist was a regular Joe or Jane, without the power to transform into a world-saving superhero.

**[Mike] The style of the character was inspired by Hampton Black, a 1930s comic book that Carl Cropley [the artist that held a long collaboration with Lewis and Price] and I had been working on together. In the comic the character is an American detective based in London but I decided to make the character a journalist as I wanted to play with elements of reporting in the game.**

Known for his love of innovation, and efforts to explore the boundaries of the genre, Lewis toyed with the user interface for

*Arkham*, introducing icons, pull-down menus and 2D animated location scenes and game characters alongside the obligatory sections that allowed text commands had to be entered. It was an evolution from *Redhawk*, moving to a more familiar and modern point-and-click style interface.

**[Mike] I wanted to produce a different sort of game from the traditional text adventure. [Arkham] [...] would let you interact with the game without the limitations of the text parser which had limited what we could do in *Redhawk* and *Kwah!* I have seen *Arkham Manor* described as one of the first point-and-click adventures and at the time the approach was quite original. I think the camera [a mechanism where the player could take photographs by capturing areas of the screen] worked well and the use of contextual menus for the commands [selecting GET for example only showed items you could pick up] meant you could play the game faster and without the frustrations of trying to find the exact word you needed.**

Lewis’s adventures had evolved the *Adventure Kernal System* [AKS], debuted in his book [co-written with Simon Price] *Writing Adventure Games* on the Amstrad. Moving to an animated adventure without the need for a complex parser removed the need for the majority of the code from AKS. Lewis kept and altered the adventure events system inherited from *Redhawk*, but implemented the surrounding engine from scratch. As described before, new point-and-click elements came into play, arming the player with a 20s portable plate camera used to record evidence, a free-format notepad that can be saved and printed, and a way to request research information on potential suspects by sending the newspaper a telegram that contained certain recognised phrases.

**[Mike] I wanted to add elements to the game where you were actually doing your job as a reporter rather than just wandering around doing the “pick up lamp”, “rub lamp”, actions of a traditional adventure. As with *Redhawk* and the crimes happening across the city [in real-time], in *Arkham*, the game continues without you and there are other people involved – I wanted to make it feel more real world.**

Another twist, something not tied to the game and could be used as a toy, was the rudimentary newspaper editor. You could create your own headlines, and add text and photographs as you desired. It gave players an outlet of fun, filing made-up stories to the Chronicle that didn’t necessarily have to reflect the gameplay.

**[Mike] [...] The idea was you were working as a journalist and thus should be taking that part. The newspaper section was to add a twist to the game but also, if you filed a story with photographs of people then your editor sends you a telegram identifying the mysterious person in the graveyard for you. So, it does have a direct impact on the game as well as being a fun thing to do.**

Long time associate Carl Cropley was on-hand to provide the graphics. Along with a superb loading screen, Cropley developed some beautifully detailed landscapes and intricate characters that were all well animated as they moved in and out of scenes. The top half of the screen was taken up with a picture of the current location, and the player moving around the scene, along with any other characters they may encounter. A side bar menu offered the limited choice of verbs and contextual commands at the player’s disposal and the bottom half of the screen held the three photographic plates and a textual feedback loop on events that occurred, or results of actions taken. Occasionally other items may appear, items that could be manipulated, such as receiving a telegram, or when an input was required for one of the actions.

**[Mike] Carl was always very good at working to the brief you gave him and his design skills for loading screens [and animations] were amazing. I wrote an editor for Carl which enabled him to draw a screen and then snatch blocks from it to create a library of images which he could then use to create each location. Thus, the locations weren’t static images but were drawn each time from a library of images and a map which said what they should look like.**

This ingenious reuse of graphical images meant that the entire game engine could be crammed into the confines of a 48K Spectrum [albeit the game was split over two parts]. There was a neat repeat of sprites



**[Above]** Chunky pixels and a clever use of palette in Carl Cropley’s *Mystery of Arkham Manor* loading screen for the Amstrad home computer.

and images, including trees, walls, doors and pavements that were intelligently patterned to compose a larger image. It was an engaging effect, and with the huge character sprites moving around the screen, it offered a more hybrid arcade adventure feel.

**[Mike] The graphics required me to come up with a number of new techniques [to] try and fit everything into the game. For the sprite images I came up with a method of generating the XOR mask for each image on the fly, meaning I didn’t have to store them. This is the image that is used to “punch” a hole in the background so you can merge the sprite image with the background one.**

All of these innovative processes took time. Having to add and replace huge swathes of code and fill in the gaps that were previously provided by the *AKS* took Lewis months. As with all adventures that began to incorporate graphics, there was a delicate tightrope to be walked between the overuse of graphics and the space required to provide an enjoyable and extensive narrative.

**[Mike] It took a while – Arkham took me 8 months to write, [whereas] *Redhawk* has taken us 5 months [and] *Kwah!* 6 weeks. I made the decision early on to split the game into two parts as it wasn’t possible to fit everything into the game. It also had a natural breakpoint at the moment you enter the Manor itself.**

As the game neared completion it was an undemanding task to get the game up and running on the Amstrad and ZX Spectrum - two home computers that Lewis had plenty of experience working with. The Amstrad version boasted a lush Cropley loading screen and animated graphics, but little effort was made to use the machine’s extra memory [64K over the Spectrum’s 48K] or better colour palette and capabilities.

**[Mike] I developed on the Amstrad and then converted to the Spectrum. It was always aimed at working on the Spectrum and**

**using the same graphics so the Amstrad version was more limited because of it. In fact, I went to see Melbourne House to show them the Amstrad version and they asked if they could have some Spectrum screenshots for publicity and I pointed out that I hadn’t done the Spectrum version yet. They were keen to get it soon so I went home, worked on it through the night and posted them a Spectrum version the next morning having completed the port in 17 hours of straight through work!**

The proposed Commodore 64 version didn’t quite go to plan. Price was a Z80 coder so it wasn’t feasible in the timeframe offered for him to do the port. Frank Gasking’s excellent Games That Weren’t [See The Secret Sid of Arkham Manor box out] website comments that most other games that hit the buffers moving from Spectrum or Amstrad to Commodore 64 were hindered by detailed isometric or other graphical effects peculiar to the Z80 architecture. For *Arkham*, a simple 2D affair, it should have been straight-forward.

Games That Weren’t documents that Alan Malik [credited in the tri-format instruction sheet included in the Spectrum and Amstrad retail game] was hired by Melbourne house as the C64 developer, which was a strange choice given his inexperience with the platform – his previous 6502 code experience was solely with the BBC Micro.

**[Mike] Basically, Melbourne House hired someone who didn’t really want to the job, was lazy and not a great coder. I spent a week with him trying to get the code up to scratch and then had to tell Melbourne House that it was a waste of time.**

Although the base code seemed to have been in place, Mike’s frustration with the speed of conversion, and the unlikely potential that it would ever be completed up his required standard in time meant that the C64 game was dropped. *Arkham* was released on the Spectrum and Amstrad in April 1987. Melbourne House published the game with a “feelie” – a neat newspaper-styled instruction sheet that

## THE SECRET SID OF ARKHAM MANOR

Because the Commodore 64 version of the game was developed after the Spectrum and Amstrad games, and so little of the game was completed it didn’t preview as extensively in the press.

Nothing remains of the C64 port. According to the Games That Weren’t [GTW] website all of the source was returned to Melbourne House during their acquisition by Mastertronic and was subsequently lost. In early 2010, a breakthrough was made when Andrew Craigie approached GTW with his unreleased soundtrack that he created for the game.

You can download the SID file from the GTW website:

<https://www.gamesthatwerent.com/gtw64/the-mystery-of-arkham-manor/>



- MOVE
- GET
- DROP
- SAY
- EXAMINE
- USE
- GIVE
- READ
- CAMERA
- REPORT
- NOTEBOOK
- SYSTEM

gave a little bit of background plot to the game. It was interspersed with period advertisements and article-style columns that gave the player instructions on how to use the camera, notepad and navigate around the interface. It was a nice touch.

Both *Redhawk* and *Kwah!* suffered by missing out on Melbourne House's golden adventure period. They were launched in basic jewel cassette boxes without the large, lavish and iconically branded cardboard packaging that *Castle of Terror*, *Hampstead* and *Sherlock* were shipped in. *Arkham*'s packaging was similarly drab in comparison, coming in a run-of-the-mill double jewel cassette that blended in with the rest of the gaming shelves (though it did feature some stunning inlay artwork).

**[Mike]** It sort of fell between the *Sherlock* era and the later era of bigger games so I think perhaps didn't get the recognition it deserved - it was also issued at the point that Melbourne House were taken over by Mastertronic and the publicity was badly handled with adverts coming out 6 weeks before the product was on the shelves.

*Mystery* did have critics. The magazines praised *Arkham* for its originality, but then in the same breath said that the attempt to mix the genres was flawed - even though Price was again trying something unique in the text adventure world. Most complained that

the action was slow and awkward - and buggy with the layout generator that sometimes resulted in the player or other characters exiting in the wrong direction to the one selected.

**[Mike]** I think that *Arkham Manor* is the title I am proudest of because it did so many different things. [...] I never really paid much attention to reviews - you take some note of what people liked and didn't like but the shelf life of a title in those days was about 6 weeks so by the time it came out I was already working on the next project.

Your Sinclair were the biggest positive voice amongst the critics handing the game a huge 9 out of 10 and a Megagame award. They commented that an "incredible amount of detail" had been packed into the program, and that *Arkham* was a "brilliant idea" blending "desktop publishing [and] the detective adventure mystery!" Gary Rook for Sinclair User gave it a 9 also, saying that he was "hooked" with the game's "gothic horror story" and that *Arkham* "deserves to be a big hit". Crash was less than complimentary with its 63% rating. Derek Brewster said "I got a little fed up [...] and decided *Arkham Manor* was best left to the zombies that roam its graveyard."

**[Mike]** I think the graphics and the interactions worked well and I think the feel of the game was good - it was still limited in scope as I was trying to fit a lot into the game - it would have worked much

better if I had been writing for a disk based computer such as the [16-bits] and IBMs which were just beginning to appear.

The takeover of Melbourne House by Mastertronic in April 1987 obviously harmed the sale of the game, as the new ownership abandoned the genre [and 8-bit games] with one eye fixed towards the onrushing console market. The loss of the Commodore 64 version also had an effect. It may not have been that well received, but without sales numbers from a far more popular platform than the Amstrad it must have harmed revenue.

**[Mike]** I never got proper royalty statements from Mastertronic so can't say how well it sold - it didn't earn out its advance - which was slightly bigger than the *Redhawk* advance - *Redhawk* earned about 4 times the advance.

After *Arkham*, Mike moved on from Mastertronic and into the arms of Macmillan Publishing's brand new software label, Piranha. He started work on another game widely previewed in magazines - a 2000AD tie-in for Alan Moore's classic feminist space-opera *Halo Jones*. With Cropley on graphical duties it shared a look and feel of *Arkham* with a very similar layout and imagery style.

**[Mike]** This was written for [Piranha] and featured a scrolling

background with the central *Halo* character staying in the middle of the screen. The game involved travelling through the *Hoop City* and encountering various people, broken travelators, etc. while trying to get to the central shopping mall. It was based on a particular *Halo Jones* story.

In 1988, magazines ran extensive *Halo Jones* previews with an in-depth look at the mechanics of the game, and featured full colour screenshots from what looked to be the Spectrum version. The top half of the screen in its entirety was filled with graphics that had a very similar look to *Arkham*, and the bottom half had news stories read out by another character, *Swiftly Frisko*. Adding to the *Arkham* mechanic a compass helped the player move around the game world. Unfortunately, the game would never be released and *Arkham* remains Mike's last adventure game [see [Issue 05](#)].

**[Mike]** You could map the system as you went a long and lifts connected different levels so knowing which direction you were travelling in helped with the mapping. I handed in the masters the day that Macmillan were wound up and eventually got paid the rest of the advance. Although I talked to a couple of other people about the game no one else wanted to buy the license to produce it.

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**A non-exhaustive list of references and other useful information:**

#### **Books, Magazines and Fanzines**

Retro Gamer Magazine, Future Publishing  
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#### **Websites and Blogs**

Mobygames  
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#### **Artwork**

The Mystery of Arkham Manor  
Melbourne House

Zzzz  
Mastertronic

Stranded  
Zenobi Games

#### **BBC Micro Knight Orc**

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**The Classic Adventurer**  
**Written and designed by** Mark James Hardisty

#### **About the author**

Mark James Hardisty is from Sheffield. His weekly pilgrimage to Just Micro as a child left him with an indelible love for Gremlin Graphics.

You can find Mark at @hardistymark, where he tweets about games, getting kids coding, The Cannonball Run, and his favourite game - *Elite* on the Acorn Electron.

#### **This work is dedicated to:**

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